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With Four Illustrations
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A. L. BURT COMPANY
Publishers New York

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CHAPTER I

UNLESS you knew that by taking a few turnings in any direction and walking for five minutes you would inevitably come into one of the great, clashing, shrieking thoroughfares of London, you might think that Romney Place, Chelsea, was situated in some world-forgotten cathedral city. Why it is called a "place," history does not record. It is simply a street, or double terrace, the quietest, sedatest, most unruffled, most old-maidish street you can imagine. Its primness is painful. It is rigorously closed to organ-grinders and German bands; and itinerant vendors of coal would have as much hope of selling their wares inside the British Museum as of attracting custom in Romney Place by their raucous appeal. Little dogs on leads and lazy Persian cats are its *genii loci*. It consists of a double row of little Early Victorian houses, each having a basement protected by area railings, an entrance floor reached by a prim little flight of steps, and an upper floor. Three little houses close one end of the street, a sleepy little modern church masks the other. Each house has a tiny back garden which, on the south side, owing to the gradual slope of the ground riverwards, is on a level with the basement floor and thus on a lower level than the street. Some of the houses on this south side are constructed with a studio on the garden level running the whole height of the house. A sloping skylight in the roof admits the precious north light, and a French window leads on to the garden.

A gallery runs round the studio, on a level and in communication with the entrance floor; and from this to the ground is a spiral staircase.

From such a gallery did Tommy Burgrave, one November afternoon, look down into the studio of Clementina Wing. She was not alone, as he had expected; for in front of an easel carrying a nearly finished portrait stood the original, a pretty, dainty girl accompanied by a well-dressed, well-fed, bullet-headed, bull-necked, commonplace young man. Clementina, on hearing footsteps, looked up.

"I'm sorry——" he began. "They didn't tell me——"

"Don't run away. We're quite through with the sitting. Come down. This is Mr. Burgrave, a neighbour of mine," she explained. "Tries to paint, too—Miss Etta Concannon—Captain Hilyard."

She performed perfunctory introductions. The group lingered round the portrait for a few moments, and then the girl and the young man went away. Clementina scrutinised the picture, sighed, pushed the easel to a corner of the studio and drew up another one into the light. Tommy sat on the model-throne and lit a cigarette.

"Who's the man?"

"This?" asked Clementina, pointing to the new portrait, that of a stout and comfortable-looking gentleman.

"No. The man with Miss Etta Something. I like the name Etta."

"He's engaged to her. I told you his name, Captain Hilyard. He called for her. I don't like him," replied Clementina, whose language was abrupt.

"He looks rather a brute—and she's as pretty as paint. It must be awful hard lines on a girl when she gets hold of a bad lot."

"You're right," she said, gathering up palette and brushes. Then she turned on him. "What are you wasting precious daylight for? Why aren't you at work?"

"I feel rather limp this afternoon, and want stimulating. So I thought I'd come in. Can I stay?"

"Oh, Lord, yes, you can stay," said Clementina, dabbing a vicious bit of paint on the canvas and stepping back to observe the effect. "Though you limp young men who need stimulating make me tired—as tired," she added, with another stroke, "as this horrible fat man's trousers."

"I don't see why you need have painted his trousers. Why not have made him half length?"

"Because he's the kind of cheesemonger that wants value for his money. If I cut him off at the waist he would think he was cheated. He pays to have his hideous trousers painted, and so I paint them."

"But you're an artist, Clementina."

"I got over the disease long ago," she replied grimly, still dabbing at the creases of the abominable and unmentionable garments. "A woman of my age and appearance hasn't any illusions left. If she has, she's a fool. I paint portraits for money, so that one of these days I may be able to retire from trade and be a lady. Bah! Art! Look at that!"

"Hi! Stop!" laughed Tommy, as soon as the result of the fresh brush-stroke was revealed. "Don't make the infernal things more hideous than they are already."

"That's where I get 'character,'" she said sarcastically. "People like it. They say: 'How rugged! How strong! How expressive!' Look at the fat, self-satisfied old pig!—and they pay me in guineas where the rest of you high artistic people get shillings. If I had the courage of my convictions and painted

him with a snout, they'd pay me in lacs of rupees. Art! Don't talk of it. I'm sick of it."

"All right," said Tommy, calmly puffing away at his cigarette, "I won't. Art is long and the talk about it is longer, thank God. So it will keep."

He was a fresh-faced, fair-haired boy of two-and-twenty, and the chartered libertine of Clementina's exclusive studio. His uncle, Ephraim Quixtus, had married a distant relation of Clementina, so, in a vague way, she was a family connection. To this fact he owed acquaintance with her—indeed, he had known her dimly from boyhood; but his intimacy he owed to a certain charm and candour of youth which had found him favour in her not very tolerant eyes.

He sat on the model-throne, clasping his knee, and, wonderingly, admiringly, watched her paint. For all her cynical depreciation of her art, she was a portrait-painter of high rank, possessing the portrait-painter's magical gift of getting at essentials, of splashing the very soul, miserable or noble, of the subject upon the canvas. She had a rough, brilliant method, direct and uncompromising as her speech. To see her at work was at once Tommy Burgrave's delight and his despair. Had she been a young and pretty woman, his masculine vanity might have smarted. But Clementina, with her ugliness, gruffness, and untidiness, scarcely ranked as a woman in his disingenuous mind. You couldn't possibly fall in love with her; no one could ever have fallen in love with her. And she, of course, had never had the remotest idea of falling in love with anybody. To his boyish fancy, Clementina in love was a grotesque conception. Besides, she might be any age. He decided that she must be about fifty. But when you made allowances for her gruffness and eccentricities, you found that she was a good

sort—and, there was no doubt about it, she could paint.

Of course, Clementina might have made herself look much younger and more prepossessing, and thereby have pleased the fancy of Tommy Burgrave. As a matter of fact she was only thirty-five. Many a woman with more years and even less foundation of beauty than Clementina flaunts about the world breaking men's hearts, obfusticating their common sense, and exerting all the bewildering influences of a seductive sex. She only has to do her hair, attend to her skin, and attire herself in more or less becoming raiment. Very little care suffices. Men are ludicrously easy to please in the way of female attractiveness—but they draw the line somewhere. It must be confessed that they drew it at Clementina Wing. Her coarse black hair straggled perpetually in uncared-for strands between fortuitous hairpins. Her complexion was dark and oily; her nose had never been powdered since its early infancy; and her face, even when she walked abroad, was often disfigured, as it was now, by a smudge of paint. She had heedlessly suffered the invasion of lines and wrinkles. A deep vertical furrow had settled hard between her black, overhanging brows. She had intensified and perpetuated the crow's-feet between her eyes by a trick, when concentrating her painter's vision on a sitter, of screwing her face into a monkey's myriad wrinkles. She dressed, habitually, in any old blouse, any old skirt, any old hat picked up at random in bedroom or studio, and picked up originally, with equal lack of selection, in any miscellaneous emporium of feminine attire. When her figure, which, as women acquaintances would whisper to each other, but never (not daring) to Clementina, had, after all, its possibilities, was hidden by a straight, shapeless, colour-

smeared painting-smock, and all of Clementina as God made her that was visible, save her capable hands, was the swarthy face with its harsh contours, its high cheekbones, its unlovely, premature furrows, surmounted by the bedraggled hair that would have disgraced a wigwam, Tommy Burgrave may be pardoned for regarding her less as a woman than a painter of genius who somehow did not happen to be a man.

Presently she laid down palette and brushes and pushed the easel to one side.

"I can't do any more at it without a model. Besides, it's getting dark. Ring for tea."

She threw off her painting-smock, revealing herself in an old brown skirt and a soiled white blouse gaping at the back, and sank with a sigh of relief into a chair. It was good to sit down, she said. She had been standing all day. She would be glad to have some tea. It would take the taste of the trousers out of her mouth.

"If you dislike them so much, why did you rush at them, as soon as those people had gone?"

"To get the girl's face out of my mind. Look here, *mon petit,*" she said, turning on him suddenly, "if you ask questions I'll turn you into the street. I'm tired; give me something to smoke."

He disinterred a yellow, crumpled packet of French tobacco and cigarette-papers from among a litter on the table, and lit the cigarette for her when she had rolled it.

"I suppose you're the only woman in London who rolls her own cigarettes."

"Well?" asked Clementina.

He laughed. "That's all."

"It was an idiotic remark," said Clementina.

The maid brought in tea, and it was Tommy who played host. She softened a little as he waited on her.

"I hear he has taken to calling himself Dr. Quixtus lately."

"He's entitled to do so. He's a Ph.D. of Heidelberg. I wish you didn't have your knife into him so much, Clementina. He's the best and dearest chap in the world. Of course, he's getting rather elderly and precise. He'll be forty next birthday, you know——"

"Lord save us," said Clementina.

"——but one has to make allowances for that. Anyway," he added, with a flash of championship, "he's the most courtly gentleman I've ever met."

"He's civil enough," said Clementina. "But if I were his wife, I'm sure I would throw him out of window."

Tommy stared again for a moment, and then laughed—more at the idea of the quaint old thing that was Clementina being married than at the picture of his uncle's grotesque ejectment.

"I don't think that's ever likely to happen," he remarked.

"Nor do I," said Clementina.

Soon after that Tommy departed as unceremoniously as he had entered. Not that Tommy Burgrave was by nature unceremonious, being a boy of excellent breeding; but no one stood on ceremony with Clementina; the elaborate politeness of the Petit Trianon was out of place in the studio of a lady who would tell you to go to the devil as soon as look at you.

When the door at the end of the gallery closed behind him she gave a sigh of relief, and rolled another cigarette. There are times when the most obstinate woman's nerves are set on edge, and she craves either solitude or a sympathetic presence. Now, she was very fond of Tommy; but what, save painting and cricket and the young animal's joy of life, could

Tommy understand? She regretted having spoken of sex and spirit to his uncomprehending ears. Generally she held herself and even her unruly tongue under control. But this afternoon she had lost grip. The sitting had strangely affected her, for she had divined, as she had not done on previous occasions, the wistful terror that lurked in the depths of the young girl's soul—a divination that had been confirmed by the quick look of fear with which she had greeted the bullet-headed young man when he had arrived to escort her home. And Tommy, with his keen young vision, had summed him up in a few words.

She turned on the great lamp suspended in the middle of the studio, and drew the easel containing the girl's portrait into the light. She gazed at it for a while intently, and then, throwing herself into her chair by the fire, remained there motionless, with parted lips, in the attitude of a woman overwhelmed by memories.

They went back fifteen years, when she was this girl's age. She had not this girl's bearing and flower-like grace; but she had her youth and everything in it that stood for the promise of life. She had memories of her mirrored self—quite a dainty slip of a girl in spite of her homely face, her hair wound around a not unshapely head in glossy coils, and her figure set off by delicately fitting clothes. And there was a light in her eyes because a man loved her and she had given all the richness of herself to the man. They were engaged to be married. Yet, for all her tremulous happiness, terror lurked in the depths of her soul. Many a night she awoke, gripped by the nameless fear, unreasonable, absurd; for the man in her eyes was as handsome and debonair as any prince out of a fairy tale. Her mother and father, who were then both alive, came under the spell of the man's fascinations.

He was of good family, fair private income, and was making a position for himself in the higher walks of journalism; a man too of unsullied reputation. A gallant lover, he loved her as in her dreams she had dreamed of being loved. The future held no flaw.

Suddenly, something so grotesque happened as to awaken all her laughter and indignation. Roland Thorne was arrested on a charge of theft. A lady, a stranger, the only other occupant of a railway-carriage in which he happened to be travelling from Plymouth to London, missed some valuable diamonds from a jewel-case beside her on the seat. At Bath she had left the carriage for a minute to buy a novel at the bookstall, leaving the case in the compartment. She brought evidence to prove that the diamonds were there when she left Plymouth and were not there when she arrived at her destination in London. The only person, according to the prosecution, who could have stolen them was Roland Thorne, during her temporary absence at Bath. Thorne treated the matter as a ludicrous annoyance. So did Clementina, as soon as her love and anger gave place to her sense of humour. And so did the magistrate who dismissed the charge, saying that it ought never to have been brought.

With closed eyes, the woman in front of the fire recalled their first long passionate kiss after he had brought the news of his acquittal, and she shivered. She remembered how he had drawn back his handsome head and looked into her eyes.

"You never for one second thought me guilty?"

Something in his gaze checked the cry of scorn at her lips. The nameless terror clutched her heart. She drew herself slowly, gradually, out of his embrace, keeping her widened eyes fixed on him. He stood motionless as she recoiled. The horrible truth dawned

on her. He was guilty. She sat on the nearest chair, white-lipped and shaken.

"You? You?"

Whether the man had meant to make the confession, probably he himself did not know. Overwrought nerves may have given way. But there he stood at that moment, self-confessed. In a kind of dream paralysis she heard him make his apologia. He said something of sins of his youth, of blackmail, of large sums of money to be paid, so as to avert ruin; how he had idly touched the jewel-case, without thought of theft, how it had opened easily, how the temptation to slip the case of diamonds into his pocket had been irresistible. His voice seemed a toneless echo, far away. He said many things that she did not hear. Afterwards she had a confused memory that he pleaded for mercy at her hands. He had only yielded in a moment of desperate madness; he would make secret restitution of the diamonds. He threw himself on the ground at her feet and kissed her skirt, but she sat petrified, speechless, stricken to her soul. Then without a word or a sign from her, he went out.

The woman by the fire recalled the anguish of the hour of returning life. It returned with the pain of blood returning to frost-bitten flesh. She loved him with every quivering fibre. No crime or weakness in the world could alter that. Her place was by his side, to champion him through evil, to ward off temptation, to comfort him in his time of need. Her generous nature cried aloud for him, craved to take him into her arms and lay his head against her bosom. She scorned herself for having turned to him a heart of stone, for letting him go broken and desperate into the world. A touch would have changed his hell to heaven, and she had not given it. She rose and stood for a while, this girl of twenty, transfigured,

vibrating with a great purpose—the woman of thirty-five remembered (ah, God!) the thrill of it. The flames of the sunrise spread through her veins.

In a few minutes she was driving through the busy streets to the man's chambers; in a few minutes more she reached them. She mounted the stairs. She had no need to ring, as the outer door stood open. She entered. Called:

"Roland, are you here?"

There was no reply. She crossed the hall and went into the sitting-room. There on the floor lay Roland Thorne with a revolver bullet through his head.

CHAPTER II

SUCH were the memories that overwhelmed Clementina Wing as she sat grim and lonely by the fire.

In the tragedy the girl Clementina perished, and from her ashes arose the phœnix of dingy plumage who had developed into the Clementina of to-day. As soon as she could envisage life again, she plunged into the strenuous art-world of Paris, living solitary, morose, and heedless of external things. The joyousness of the light-hearted crowd into which she was thrown jarred upon her. It was like Bacchanalian revelry at a funeral. She made no friends. Good-natured importunates she drove away with rough usage. The pairs of young men and maidens who flaunted their foolish happiness in places of public resort she regarded with misanthropic eye. She hated them—at one-and-twenty—because they were fools; because they deluded themselves into the belief that the world was rose and blue and gold, whereas she, of her own bitter knowledge, knew it to be drab. And from a drab world what was there more vain than the attempt to extract colour? Beauty left her unmoved because it had no basis in actuality. The dainty rags in which she had been accustomed to garb herself she threw aside with contempt. Sackcloth was the only wear.

It must be remembered that Clementina at this period was young, and that it is only given to youth to plumb the depths of existence. She was young, strong-fibred, desperately conscious of herself. She

had left her home rejecting sympathy. To no one could she exhibit the torture of her soul; to no one could she confess the remorse and shame that consumed her. She was a failure in essentials. She had failed the man in his hour of need. She had let him go forth to his death. She, Clementina Wing, was a failure. She, Clementina Wing, was the world. Therefore was the world a failure. She saw life drab. Her vision was infallible. Therefore life was drab. Syllogisms, with the eternal fallacy of youth in their minor premises. Work saved her reason. She went at it feverishly, indefatigably, unremittingly, as only a woman can—and only a woman who has lost sense of values. Her talent was great—in those days she did not scout the suggestion of genius—and by her indomitable pains she acquired the marvellous technique which had brought her fame. The years slipped away. Suddenly she awakened. A picture exhibited in the Salon obtained for her a gold medal, which pleased her mightily. She was not as dead as she had fancied, having still the power to feel the thrill of triumph. Money much more than would satisfy her modest wants jingled in her pockets with a jocund sound. Folks whom she had kept snarlingly at bay whispered honeyed flattery in her ears. Philosophy, which (of a bitter nature) she had cultivated during her period of darkness, enabled her to estimate the flattery at its true value; but no philosophy in the world could do away with the sweetness of it. So it came to pass that on her pleasant road to success, Clementina realised that there was such a thing as light and shade in life as well as in pictures. But though she came out of the underworld a different woman from the one who had sojourned there, she was still a far more different woman from the girl who had flung herself into it headlong. She emerged

cynical, rough, dictatorial, eccentric in speech, habits, and attire. As she had emancipated herself from the gloom of remorse and self-torture, so did she emancipate herself from convention. Youth had flown early, and with it the freshness that had given charm to her young face. Lines had come, bones had set, the mouth had hardened. She had lost the trick of personal adornment. Years of loose and casual corseting had ruined her figure. Even were she to preen and primp herself, what man would look at her with favour? As for women, she let them go hang. She was always impatient of the weaknesses, frailties, and vanities of her own sex, especially when they were marked by an outer show of strength. The helpless she had been known to take to her bosom as she would have taken a wounded bird—but her sex as a whole attracted her but little. Women could go hang, because she did not want them. Men could go hang likewise, because they did not want her. Thus dismissing from her horizon all the human race, she found compensation in the freedom so acquired. If she chose to run bareheaded and slipshod into the King's Road and come back with a lump of beef wrapped in a bloodstained bit of newspaper (as her acquaintance, Mrs. Venables, had caught her doing—"My dear, you never saw such an appalling sight in your life," she said when reporting the incident, "and she had the impudence to make me shake hands with her—and the hand, my dear, in which she had been holding the beef")—if she chose to do this, what mattered it to any one of God's creatures, save perhaps Mrs. Venables's glove-maker to whom it was an advantage? Her servant had a bad cold, time—the morning light was precious—and the putting on of hat and boots a retarding vanity. If she chose to bring in a shivering ragamuffin from the streets

and warm him before the fire and stuff him with the tomato sandwiches and plum-cake set out for a visitor's tea, who could say her nay? The visitor in revolt against the sight and smell of the ragamuffin, could get up and depart. It was a matter of no concern to Clementina. Eventually folks recognised Clementina's eccentricity, classed it in the established order of things, ceased to regard it—just as dwellers by a cataract lose the sound of the thunder, and as a human wife ceases to be conscious of the wart on her husband's nose. To this enviable height of freedom had Clementina risen.

She sat by the fire, overwhelmed by memories. They had been conjured up by the girl with the terror at the back of her eyes; but their mass was no longer crushing. They came over her like a weightless grey cloud that had arisen from some remote past with which she had no concern. She had grown to look upon the tragedy impersonally, as though it were a melodramatic tale written by a young and inexperienced writer, in which the characters were overdrawn and untrue to life. The reading of the tale left her with the impression that Roland Thorne was an unprincipled weakling, Clementina Wing an hysterical little fool.

Presently she rose, rubbed her face hard with both hands, a proceeding which had the effect of spreading the paint smudge into a bright gamboge over her cheeks, pushed the easel aside, and, taking down "Tristram Shandy" from her shelves, read the story of the King of Bohemia and his Seven Castles, by way of a change of fiction, till her maid summoned her to her solitary dinner.

Early the next morning, as soon as she had entered the studio and had begun to set her palette, preparatory to the day's work, Tommy Burgrave appeared

on the gallery, with a "Hullo, Clementina!" and ran down the spiral staircase. Clementina paused with a paint tube in her hand.

"Look, my young friend, you don't live here, you know," she said coolly.

"I'll clear out in half a second," he replied, smiling. "I'm bringing you news. You ought to be very grateful to me. I've got you a commission."

"Who's the fool?" asked Clementina.

"It isn't a fool," said Tommy, buttoning the belt of his Norfolk jacket, as if to brace himself to the encounter. "It's my uncle."

"Lord save us!" said Clementina.

"I thought I would give you a surprise," said Tommy.

Clementina shrugged her shoulders and went on squeezing paint out of tubes.

"He must have softening of the brain."

"Why?"

"First for wanting to have his portrait painted at all, and secondly for thinking of coming to me. Go back and tell him I'm not a caricaturist."

Tommy planted a painting-stool in the middle of the floor and sat upon it, with legs apart.

"Let us talk business, Clementina. In the first place, he has nothing to do with it. He doesn't want his portrait painted, bless you. It's the other prehistoric fossils he foregathers with. I met chunks of them at dinner last night. They belong to the Anthropological Society, you know, they fool around with antediluvian stones and bones and bits of iron—and my uncle's president. They want to have his portrait to hang up in the cave where they meet. They were talking about it at my end of the table. They didn't know what painter to go to, so they consulted me. My uncle had introduced me as an artist, you know,

and they looked on me as a sort of young prophet. I asked them how much they were prepared to give. They said about five hundred pounds—they evidently have a lot of money to throw about—one of them, all over gold chains and rings, seemed to perspire money, looked like a bucket-shop keeper. I think it's he who is presenting the Society with the portrait. Anyway, that's about your figure, so I said there was only one person to paint my uncle and that was Clementina Wing. It struck them as a brilliant idea, and the end of it was that they told my uncle and requested me to sound you on the matter. I've sounded."

She looked at his confident boyish face, and uttered a grim sound, halfway between a laugh and a sniff, which was her nearest approach to exhibition of mirth, and might have betokened amusement or pity or contempt or any two of these taken together or the three combined. Then she turned away and, screwing up her eyes, looked out for a few moments into the sodden back garden.

"Did you ever hear of a barber refusing to shave a man because he didn't like the shape of his whiskers?"

"Only one," said Tommy, "and he cut the man's throat from ear to ear with the razor."

He laughed aloud at his own jest, and going up to the window where Clementina stood with her back to him, laid a hand on her shoulder.

"That means you'll do it."

"Guineas, not pounds," said Clementina, facing him. "Five hundred guineas. I couldn't endure Ephraim Quixtus for less."

"Leave it to me, I'll fix it up. So long." He ran up the spiral staircase, in high good-humour. On the gallery he paused and leaned over the balustrade.

"I say, Clementina, if the ugly young man calls

to-day for that pretty Miss Etta, and you want any murdering done, send for me."

She looked up at him smiling down upon her, gay and handsome, so rich in his springtide, and she obeyed a sudden impulse.

"Come down, Tommy."

When he had descended she unhooked from the wall over the fireplace a Della Robbia plaque—a child's white head against a background of yellow and blue—a cherished possession—and thrust it into Tommy's arms. He stared at her, but clutched the precious thing tight for fear of dropping it.

"Take it. You can give it as a wedding present to your wife when you have one. I want you to have it."

He stammered, overwhelmed by her magnificent and unprecedented generosity. He could not accept the plaque. It was too priceless a gift.

"That's why I give it to you, you silly young idiot," she cried impatiently. "Do you think I'd give you a pair of embroidered braces or a hymn-book? Take it and go."

What Tommy did then, nine hundred and ninety-nine young men out of a thousand would not have done. He held out his hand—"Rubbish," said Clementina; but she held out hers—he gripped it, swung her to him and gave her a good, full, sounding, honest kiss. Then, holding the thing of beauty against his heart he leaped up the stairs and disappeared, with an exultant "Good-bye," through the door.

A dark flush rose on the kissed spot on Clementina's cheek. Softness crept into her hard eyes. She looked at the vacant place on the wall where the cherished thing of beauty had hung. By some queer optical illusion it appeared even brighter than before.

Tommy, being a young man of energy and enthusiasm with modern notions as to the reckoning of time,

rushed the Anthropologists, who were accustomed to reckon time by epochs instead of minutes, off their leisurely feet. His uncle had said words of protest at this indecent haste; "My dear Tommy, if you were more of a reflective human being and less of a whirlwind, it would frequently add to your peace and comfort." But Tommy triumphed. Within a very short period everything was settled, the formal letters had been exchanged, and Ephraim Quixtus found himself paying a visit, in a new character, to Clementina Wing.

She received him in her prim little drawing-room—as prim and old-maidish as Romney Place itself—a striking contrast to the chaotically equipped studio which, as Tommy declared, resembled nothing so much as a show-room after a bargain-sale. The furniture was the stiffest of Sheraton, the innocent colour engravings of Tomkins, Cipriani, and Bartolozzi hung round the walls, and in a corner stood a spinning-wheel with a bunch of flax on the distaff. The room afforded Clementina perpetual grim amusement. Except when she received puzzled visitors she rarely sat in it from one year's end to the other.

"I haven't seen you since the Deluge, Ephraim," she said, as he bent over her hand in an old-fashioned un-English way. "How's prehistoric man getting on?"

"As well," said he, gravely, "as can be expected."

Ephraim Quixtus, Ph.D., was a tall, gaunt man of forty, with a sallow complexion, raven black hair thinning at the temples and on the crown of his head, and great, mild, china-blue eyes. A reluctant moustache gave his face a certain lack of finish. Clementina's quick eye noted it at once. She screwed up her face and watched him.

"I could make a much more presentable thing of you if you were clean shaven," she said brusquely.

"I couldn't shave off my moustache."

"Why not?"

He started in alarm.

"I think the Society would prefer to have their President in the guise in which he presided over them."

"Umph!" said Clementina. She looked at him again, and with a touch of irony; "Perhaps it's just as well. Sit down."

"Thank you," said Quixtus, seating himself on one of the stiff Sheraton chairs. And then, courteously: "You have travelled far since we last met, Clementina. You are famous. I wonder what it feels like to be a celebrity."

She shrugged her shoulders. "In my case it feels like leading apes in hell. By the way, when did I last see you."

"It was at poor Angela's funeral, five years ago."

"So it was," said Clementina.

There was a short silence. Angela was his dead wife and her distant relation.

"What has become of Will Hammersley?" she asked suddenly. "He has given up writing to me."

"Still in Shanghai, I think. He went out, you know, to take over the China branch of his firm—just before Angela's death, wasn't it? It's a couple of years or more since I have heard from him."

"That's strange; he was an intimate friend of yours," said Clementina.

"The only intimate friend I've ever had in my life. We were at school and at Cambridge together. Somehow, although I have many acquaintances and, so to speak, friends, yet I've never formed the intimacies that most men have. I suppose," he added, with a sweet smile, "it's because I'm rather a dry stick."

"You're ten years older than your age," said Clementina, frankly. "You want shaking up. It's a pity

Will Hammersley isn't here. He used to do you a lot of good."

"I'm glad you think so much of Hammersley," said Quixtus.

"I don't think much of most people, do I?" she said. "But Hammersley was a friend in need. He was to me, at any rate."

"Are you still fond of Sterne?" he asked. "I think you are the only woman who ever was."

She nodded. "Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking," he said, in his quiet, courtly way, "that we have many bonds of sympathy, after all; Angela, Hammersley, Sterne, and my scapegrace nephew, Tommy."

"Tommy is a good boy," said Clementina, "and he'll learn to paint some day."

"I must thank you for your very great kindness to him."

"Bosh!" said Clementina.

"It's a great thing for a young fellow—wild and impulsive like Tommy—to have a good friend in a woman older than himself."

"If you think, my good man," snapped Clementina, reverting to her ordinary manner, "that I look after his morals, you are very much mistaken. What has it got to do with me if he kisses models and takes them out to dinner in Soho?"

The lingering Eve in her resented the suggestion of a maternal attitude towards the boy. After all, she was not five-and-fifty; she was younger, five years younger than the stick of an uncle who was talking to her as if he had stepped out of the pages of a Sunday-school prize.

"He never tells me of the models," replied Quixtus, "and I'm very glad he tells you. It shows there is no harm in it."

"Let us talk sense," said Clementina, "and not waste time. You've come to me to have your portrait painted. I've been looking at you. I think a half-length, sitting down, would be the best—unless you want to stand up in evening-dress behind a table, with presidential gold chains and badges of office and hammers and water-bottles——"

"Heaven forbid!" cried Quixtus, who was as modest a man as ever stepped. "What you suggest will quite do."

"I suppose you will wear that frock-coat and turn-down collar? Don't you ever wear a narrow black tie?"

"My dear Clementina," he cried horrified, "I may not be the latest thing in dandyism, but I've no desire to look like a Scotch deacon in his Sunday clothes."

"Vanity again," said Clementina. "I could have got something much better out of you in a narrow black tie. Still, I daresay I'll manage—though what your bone-digging friends want with a portrait of you at all for, I'm blest if I can understand."

With which gracious remark she dismissed him, after having arranged a date for the first sitting.

"A poor creature," muttered Clementina, when the door closed behind him.

The poor creature, however, walked smartly homewards through the murky November evening, perfectly contented with God and man—even with Clementina herself. In this well-ordered world, even the tongue of an eccentric woman must serve some divine purpose. He mused whimsically on the purpose. Well, at any rate, she belonged to a dear and regretted past, which without throwing an absolute glamour around Clementina still shed upon her its softening rays. His thoughts were peculiarly retrospective this evening.

It was a Tuesday, and his Tuesday nights for some years had been devoted to a secret and sacred gathering of pale ghosts. His Tuesday nights were mysteries to all his friends. When pressed for the reason of this perennial weekly engagement, he would say vaguely: "It's a club to which I belong." But what was the nature of the club, what the grim and ghastly penalty if he skipped a meeting, those were questions which he left, with a certain innocent mirth, to the conjecture of the curious.

The evening was fine, with a touch of shrewdness in the air. He found himself in the exhilarated frame of mind which is consonant with brisk walking. He look at his watch. He could easily reach Russell Square by seven o'clock. He timed his walk exactly. It was five minutes to seven when he let himself in by his latchkey. The parlour-maid, emerging from the dining-room, met him in the hall and helped him off with his coat.

"The gentlemen have come, sir."

"Dear, dear," said Quixtus, self-reproachfully.

"They're before their time. It isn't seven yet, sir," said the parlour-maid, flinging the blame upon the gentlemen. In speaking of them she had just the slightest little supercilious tilt of the nose.

Quixtus waited until she had retired, then, drawing something from his own pocket, he put something into the pocket of each of three greatcoats that hung in the hall. After that he ran upstairs into the drawing-room. Three men rose to receive him.

"How do you do, Huckaby. So glad to see you, Vandermeer. My dear Billiter."

He apologised for being late. They murmured excuses for being early. Quixtus asked leave to wash his hands, went out and returned rubbing them, as though in anticipation of enjoyment. Two of the

men standing in front of the fire made way for him. He thrust them back courteously.

"No, no, I'm warm. Been walking for miles. I've not seen an evening paper. What's the news?"

Quixtus never saw an evening paper on Tuesdays. The question was a time-honoured opening to the kindly game he played with his guests.

Now there is a reason for most things, even for a parlour-maid's tilt of the nose. The personal appearance of the guests would have tilted the nose of any self-respecting parlour-maid in Russell Square. They were a strange trio. All were shabby and out-at-elbows. All wore the insecure, apologetic collar which is one of the most curious badges of the down-at-heel. All bore on their faces the signs of privation and suffering; Huckaby, lantern-jawed, black-bearded and watery-eyed; Vandermeer, small, decrepit, pinched of feature, with crisp, sparse red hair and the bright eyes of a hungry wolf; Billiter, the flabby remains of a heavily built florid man, with a black moustache turning grey. They were ghosts of the past, who once a week came back to the plentiful earth, lived for a few brief hours in the land that had been their heritage, talked of the things they had once loved, and went forth (so Quixtus hoped) cheered and comforted for their next week's wandering on the banks of Acheron. Once a week they sat at a friend's table and ate generous food, drank generous wine, and accepted help from a friend's generous hand. Help they all needed, and like desperate men would snatch it from any hand held out to them. Huckaby had been a successful coach at Cambridge; Vandermeer, who had forsaken early in life a banking office for the Temple of Literary Fame, had starved for years on free-lance journalism; Billiter, of Rugby and Oxford, had run through a fortune. All waste products of the world's factory. Among

the many things they had in common was an unquenchable thirst, which they dissimulated in Russell Square; but they made up for it by patronising their host. When a beneficiary is humble he is either deserving or has touched the lowest depths of degradation.

Quixtus presided happily at the meal. With strangers he was shy and diffident; but here he was at his ease, among old friends none the less valued because they had fallen by the wayside. Into the reason of their fall it did not concern him to inquire. All that mattered was their obvious affection and the obvious brightness that fortune had enabled him to shed on their lives.

"I wonder," said he, with one of his sudden smiles, "I wonder if you fellows know how I prize these evenings of ours."

"They're Attic Symposia," said Huckaby.

"I've been thinking of a series of articles on them, after the manner of the *Noctes Ambrosianæ*," said Vandermeer.

"They would quite bear it," Huckaby agreed. "I think we get better talk here than anywhere else I know. I'm a sometime Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge,"—he rolled out the alliterative phrase with great sonority—"and I know the talk in the Combination Room; but it's pedantic—pedantic. Not ripe and mellow like ours."

"I'm not a brainy chap like you others," said Billiter, wiping his dragoon's moustache, "but I like to have my mind improved, now and then."

"Do you know the *Noctes,* Huckaby?" asked Quixtus. "Of course you do. What do you think of them?"

"I suppose you like them," replied Huckaby, "because you are an essentially scientific and not a literary man. But I think them dull."

"I don't call them dull," Quixtus argued, "but to my mind they're pretentious. I don't like their sham heartiness, their slap-on-the-back and how-are-you-old-fellow tone, their impossible Pantagruelian banquets——"

The hungry wolf's face of Vandermeer lit up. "That's what I like about them—the capons—the pies—the cockaleeky—the haggises——"

"I remember a supper-party at Oxford," said Billiter, "when there was a haggis, and one chap who was awfully tight insisted that a haggis ought to be turned like an omelette or tossed like a pancake. He tossed it. My God! You never saw such a thing in your life!"

So they all talked according to the several necessities of their natures, and at last Quixtus informed his guests that he was to sit for his portrait to Miss Clementina Wing.

"I believe she is really quite capable," said Huckaby, judicially, stroking his straggling beard.

"I know her," cried Vandermeer. "A most charming woman."

Quixtus raised his eyebrows.

"I'm glad to hear you say so," said he. "She is a sort of distant connection of mine by marriage."

"I interviewed her," said Vandermeer.

"Good Lord!" The exclamation on the part of Quixtus was inaudible.

"I was doing a series of articles—very important articles," said Vandermeer, with an assertive glance around the table, "on Women Workers of To-day, and of course Miss Clementina Wing came into it. I called and put the matter before her."

He paused dramatically.

"And then?" asked Quixtus, amused.

"We went out to lunch in a restaurant and she

gave me all the material necessary for my article. A most charming woman, who I think will do you justice, Quixtus."

When his friends had gone, each, by the way, diving furtive and searching hands into their great-coat pockets, as soon as they had been helped into these garments by the butler—and here, by the way also, be it stated that, no matter how sultry the breath of summer or how frigid that of fortune, they never failed to bring overcoats to hang, for all the world like children's stockings for Santa Claus, on the familiar pegs—when his friends were gone, Quixtus, who had an elementary sense of humour, failed entirely to see an expansive and notoriety-seeking Clementina lunching tête-à-tête at the Carlton or the Savoy with Theodore Vandermeer. In point of fact, he fell asleep smiling at the picture.

The next day, while he was at breakfast—he breakfasted rather late—Tommy Burgrave was announced. Tommy, who had already eaten with the appetite of youth, immediately after his cold bath, declined to join his uncle in a meal, but for the sake of sociability trifled with porridge, kidneys, cold ham, hot rolls and marmalade, while Quixtus feasted on a soft-boiled egg and a piece of dry toast. When his barmecide meal was over, Tommy came to the business of the day. For some inexplicable, unconjecturable reason his monthly allowance had gone, disappeared, vanished into the *Ewigkeit*. What in the world was he to do?

Now it must be explained that Tommy Burgrave was an orphan, the son of Ephraim Quixtus's only sister, and his whole personal estate a sum of money invested in a mortgage which brought him in fifty pounds a year. On fifty pounds a year a young man cannot lead the plenteous life as far as food and raiment are concerned, rent a studio (even though it be a

converted first-floor back, as Tommy's was) and a bedroom in Romney Place, travel (even on a bicycle, as Tommy did) about England, and entertain ladies to dinner at restaurants—even though the ladies may be only models, and the restaurants in Soho. He must have other financial support. This other financial support came to him in the guise of a generous allowance from his uncle. But as the generosity of his instincts —and who in the world would be a cynic, animated blight, curmudgeon enough to check the generous instincts of youth?—as, I say, the generosity of his instincts outran the generosity of his allowance, towards the end of every month Tommy found himself in a most naturally inexplicable position. At the end of the month, therefore, Tommy came to Russell Square and trifled with porridge, kidneys, cold ham, hot rolls and marmalade, while his uncle feasted on a soft-boiled egg and a piece of dried toast, and, at the end of his barmecide feast, came to business.

On the satisfactory conclusion thereof (and it had never been known to be otherwise) Tommy lit a cigar —he liked his uncle's cigars.

"Well," said he, "what do you think of Clementina?"

"I think," said Quixtus, with a faint luminosity lighting his china-blue eyes, "I think that Clementina, being an artist, is a problem. But if she weren't an artist and in a different class of life, she would be a model old family servant in a great house in which the family, by no chance whatever, resided."

Tommy laughed. "It seemed tremendously funny to bring you two together."

Quixtus smiled indulgently. "So it was a practical joke on your part?"

"Oh, no!" cried Tommy, flaring up. "You mustn't think that. There's only one painter living who has

her power—and I'm one of the people who know it—and I wanted her to paint you. Besides, she is a thorough good sort—through and through."

"My dear boy, I was only jesting," said Quixtus, touched by his earnestness. "I know that not only are you a devotee—and very rightly so—of Clementina—but that she is a very great painter."

"All the same," said Tommy, with a twinkle in his eyes, "I'm afraid that you're in for an awful time."

"I'm afraid so, too," said Quixtus, whimsically, "but I'll get through it somehow."

He did get through it; but it was only "somehow." This quiet, courtly, dreamy gentleman irritated Clementina as he had irritated her years ago. He was a learned man; that went without saying; but he was a fool all the same, and Clementina had not trained herself to suffer fools gladly. The portrait became her despair. The man had no character. There was nothing beneath the surface of those china-blue eyes. She was afraid, she said, of getting on the canvas the portrait of a congenital idiot. His attitude towards life—the dilettante attitude which she as a worker despised—made her impatient. By profession he was a solicitor, head of the old-fashioned firm of Quixtus and Son; but, on his open avowal, he neglected the business, leaving it all in the hands of his partner.

"He'll do you, sure as a gun," said Clementina.

Quixtus smiled. "My father trusted him implicitly, and so do I."

"A man or a woman's a fool to trust anybody," said Clementina.

"I've trusted everybody around me all my life, and no one has done me any harm, and therefore I'm a happy man."

"Rubbish," said Clementina. "Any fraud gets the

better of you. What about your German friend Tommy was telling me of?"

This was a sore point. A most innocent, spectacled, bearded, but obviously poverty-stricken German had called on him a few weeks before with a collection of flint instruments for sale, which he alleged to have come from the valley of the Weser, near Hameln. They were of shapes and peculiarities which he had not met with before, and, after a cursory and admiring examination, he had given the starving Teuton twice as much as he had asked for the collection, and sent him on his way rejoicing. With a brother palæontologist summoned in haste he had proceeded to a minute scrutiny of his treasures. They were impudent forgeries.

"I told Tommy in confidence. He ought not to have repeated the story," he said, with dignity.

"Which shows," said Clementina, pausing so as to make her point and an important brush-stroke—"which shows that you can't even trust Tommy."

On another occasion he referred to Vandermeer's famous interview.

"You know a friend of mine, Vandermeer," said he.

Clementina shook her head.

"Never heard the name."

He explained. Vandermeer was a journalist. He had interviewed her and lunched with her at a restaurant.

Clementina could not remember. At last her knitted brow cleared.

"Good lord, do you mean a half-starved, foxy-faced man with his toes through his boots?"

"The portrait is unflattering," said he, "but I'm afraid there's a kind of resemblance."

"He looked so hungry and *was* so hungry—he told me—that I took him to the ham-and-beef shop round

the corner and stuffed his head with copy while he stuffed himself with ham and beef. To say that he lunched with me at a restaurant is infernal impudence."

"Poor fellow," said Quixtus. "He has to live rather fatly in imagination so as to make up for the meagreness of his living in reality. It's only human nature."

"Bah," said Clementina, "I believe you'd find human nature in the devil."

Quixtus smiled one of his sweet smiles.

"I find it in you, Clementina," he said.

Thus it may be perceived that the sittings were not marked by the usual amenities of the studio. The natures of the two were antagonistic. He shrank from her downrightness; she disdained his ineffectuality. Each bore with the other for the sake of past associations; but each drew a breath of relief when freed from the presence of the other. Although he was a man of wide culture beyond the bounds of his own particular subject, and could talk well in a half-humorous, half-pedantic manner, her influence often kept him as dumb as a mummy. This irritated Clementina still further. She wanted him to talk, to show some animation, so that she could seize upon something to put upon the dismaying canvas. She talked nonsense, in order to stimulate him.

"To live in the past as you do without any regard for the present is as worthless as to go to bed in a darkened room and stay there for the rest of your life. It's the existence of a mole, not of a man."

He indicated, with a wave of the hand, a Siennese *predella* on the wall. "You go to the past."

"For its lessons," said Clementina. "Because the Old Masters can teach me things. How on earth do you think I should be able to paint you if it hadn't been for Velasquez? To say nothing of the æsthetic

side. But you only go to the past to satisfy an idle curiosity."

"Perhaps I do, perhaps I do," he assented, mildly. "A knowledge of the process by which a prehistoric lady fashioned her petticoat out of skins by means of a flint needle and reindeer sinews would be of no value to Worth or Paquin. But it soothes me personally to contemplate the intimacies of the toilette of the prehistoric lady."

"I call that abnormal," said Clementina, "and you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

And that was the end of that conversation.

Meanwhile, in spite of her half-comic despair, the portrait progressed. She had seized, at any rate, the man's air of intellectuality, of aloofness from the practical affairs of life. Unconsciously she had invested the face with a spirituality which had eluded her conscious analysis. The artist had worked with the inner vision, as the artist always does when he produces a great work. For the great work of an artist is not that before which he stands, and, sighing, says: "This is fair, but how far away from my dreams!" That is the popular fallacy. The great work is that which, when he regards it on completion, causes him to say in humble admiration and modest stupefaction: "How on earth did the dull clod that is I manage to do it?" For he does not know how he accomplished it. When a man is conscious of every step he takes in the execution of a work of art, he is obeying the letter and not the spirit; he is a juggler with formulas; and formulas, being mere analytical results, have no place in that glorious synthesis which is creation—either of a world or a flower or a poem. Clementina, to her astonishment, regarded the portrait of Ephraim Quixtus, and, like the First Creator regarding His work, saw that it was good.

"I should never have believed it," she said.

"What?" asked Quixtus.

"That I should have got all this out of you," said Clementina.

CHAPTER III

WE have heard much of a man in the Land of Uz whose name was Job. We know that he was perfect and upright, feared God, and eschewed evil; and we are told how, on a disastrous afternoon, messenger after messenger came to him to announce one calamity after the other, culminating in the annihilation of his entire family, and how the final scorbutic affliction came shortly afterwards, the anti-climax, it must be confessed, of his woes, which drove the patient man to open his mouth and curse his day. Between Job and Dr. Quixtus I doubt whether the like avalanche of disasters, Pelion on Ossa and Kunchinginja on Pelion of misfortunes, ever came thundering down on the head of an upright and evil-eschewing human creature.

The tale of these successive misfortunes can only be briefly narrated; for to examine in detail the train of circumstances which led up to them, and the intricate nexus of human motive in which they were complicated would be foreign to the purpose of this chronicle. Except passively or negatively, perhaps, Quixtus had no hand in their happening. As in the case of Job, the thunderbolts fell from a cloudless sky. His moral character was blameless, his position as assured, his life as happy as the patriarch's. He had done no man harm all his days, and he had no cause to fear evil from any quarter. A tithe or more of his goods he gave in generous charity; and not only did he not proclaim the fact aloud like the Phari-

see, but never mentioned the matter to himself—for the simple reason that keeping no accounts of his expenditure he had not the remotest notion of the amount of his eleemosynary expenses. You would have far to go to meet a man more free from petty-mindedness or vanity than Ephraim Quixtus. He was mild, urbane, and, for all his scholarly reading, palæolithic knowledge, and wide travel, singularly modest. If you contradicted him, instead of asserting himself, as most men do, with increased vigour, he forthwith put back to find, if possible, the flaw in his own argument. When complimented on his undoubted attainments, he always sought to depreciate them. The achievement of others, even in his own special department of learning, moved his generous admiration. Yet he had one extraordinary vanity—which made him fall short of the perfection of his prototype in the Land of Uz—the doctorial title which he possessed by virtue of his Ph.D. degree from the University of Heidelberg. Through signing his articles in learned publications "Ephraim Quixtus, Ph.D.," his brethren among the learned who rent him respectfully to pieces in other learned publications, invariably alluded to him as Dr. Quixtus. Through being thus styled by his brethren both in print and conversation, he began to give his name as Dr. Quixtus to the stentorian functionary at the doors of banquets and receptions of the learned, and derived infinite gratification from hearing it loudly proclaimed to all assembled. From that to announcing himself as "Dr. Quixtus" to the parlour-maid or butler in the homes of the worldly was but a step.

Now it may be questioned whether on the rolls kept by the Incorporated Law Society there is a solicitor who would style himself Doctor. It would be as foreign to the ordinary solicitor's notions of

professional propriety as to interview his clients in a surplice. The title does not suggest a solicitor—any more than Quixtus himself did in person. He was a stranger, an anomaly, a changeling in the Corporation. He ought never to have been a solicitor. He was a very bad solicitor—and that was what the judge said, among other things of a devastating nature, when he was giving evidence at a certain memorable trial, which took place not long after he had re-entered the stormy horizon of Clementina Wing, and his portrait had been hung above the presidential chair of the Anthropological Society.

It is but justice to say that Quixtus was a solicitor not by choice, but by inheritance and filial affection. His father had an old-fashioned lucrative family practice, into which, as it was his father's earnest desire, his kindly nature allowed him to drift. When his father died suddenly, almost as soon as his articles were completed and he was admitted into partnership, he stared in dismay at the prospect before him. He could no more draw up a conveyance of land, or administer a bankrupt estate, or prepare a brief for a barrister, than he could have steered an Atlantic liner into New York Harbour. And he had not the faintest desire to know how to draw up a conveyance or administer an estate. Beyond acquiring from textbooks the bare information requisite for the passing of his examinations, he had never attempted to probe deeper into the machinery of the law. His mind attributed far greater importance to the sharp flint instruments wherewith primitive men settled their quarrels by whanging each other over the head than to the miserable instruments on parchment which adjusted the sordid wrangles of the present generation. By entering the profession he had merely gratified a paternal whim. There had been a "Quixtus

and Son" in Lincoln's Inn for a hundred years, and it was the dearest wish of the old man's heart that "Quixtus and Son" should remain there *in sæcula sæculorum*. While his father was alive Ephraim had scarcely thought of this desirable continuity. But his father dead, it behooved him to see piously to its establishment.

The irksome part of the matter was that he had no financial reason for proceeding with an abominated profession. As hunger drives the wolves abroad, according to François Villon, so might hunger have driven him from his palæolithic forest. But there was no chance of his being hungry. Not only did his father and his mother each leave him a comfortable fortune, but he was the declared heir of an uncle, his father's elder brother, who possessed large estates in Devonshire, and had impressed Ephraim from his boyhood up as one in advanced and palsied old age.

Yet "Quixtus and Son" had to be carried on. How? He consulted the confidential clerk, Marrable who had been in the office since boyhood. Marrable at once suggested a solution of the difficulty which almost caused Ephraim to throw himself into his arms for joy. It was wonderful! It was immense! Quixtus welcomed it as Henry VIII. welcomed Cromwell's suggestion for getting rid of Queen Katherine. The solution was nothing less than that Ephraim should take him into partnership on generous terms. The deed of partnership was drawn up and signed, and Quixtus entered upon a series of happy and prosperous years. He attended the office occasionally, signed letters and interviewed old family clients, whom he entertained with instructive though irrelevant gossip until they went away comforted. When they insisted on business advice instead of comfort, he rang the bell, and Marrable appeared like a djinn out of a

bottle. Nothing could be simpler, nothing could work more satisfactorily. Not only did clients find their affairs thoroughly looked after, but they were flattered at having bestowed upon them the concentrated legal acumen and experience of the firm. You may say that, as a solicitor, Quixtus was a humbug; that he ought never to have accepted the position. But show me a man who has never done that which he ought not to have done, and you will show me either an irresponsible idiot or an angel masquerading in mortal vesture. I have my doubts whether Job himself before his trials was quite as perfect as he is made out to be. Quixtus was neither idiot nor angel. At the most he was a scholarly, ineffectual gentleman of comfortable means, forced by filial tenderness into a distasteful and bewildering pursuit. He had neither the hard-heartedness to kill the one, nor the strength of will to devote himself to the mastery of the other. He compromised, you may say, with the devil. Well, the devil is notoriously insidious, and Quixtus was entirely unconscious of subscribing to a bargain. At any rate, the devil had a hand in his undoing and appointed a zealous agent of iniquity in the person of Mr. Samuel Marrable.

When Quixtus went to Lincoln's Inn Fields one morning and found, instead of his partner, a letter from him stating that he had gone abroad and would remain there without an address for an indefinite time, Quixtus was surprised. When he had summoned the managing clerk and together they had opened Marrable's safe, both he and the clerk were bewildered; and after he had spent an hour or two with a chartered accountant, for whom he had hurriedly telephoned, he grew sick from horror and amazement. Later in the day he heard through the police that a warrant was out for Samuel Marrable's arrest. In the course

of time he learned that Samuel Marrable had done everything that a solicitor should not do. He had misappropriated trust-funds; he had made away with bearer-bonds; he had falsified accounts; he had forged transfers; he had speculated in wild-cat concerns; he had become the dupe of a gang of company promoters known throughout the City as "Gehenna Unlimited." He had robbed the widow; he had robbed the orphan; he had robbed the firm; he had robbed with impunity for many years; but when, in desperation, he had tried to rob "Gehenna Unlimited," they were too much for him. So Samuel Marrable had fled the country.

Thus fell the first thunderbolt. Quixtus saw the fair repute of "Quixtus and Son" shattered in an instant, his own name tarnished, himself—and this was the most cruel part of the matter—betrayed and fooled by the man in whom he had placed his boundless trust. Marrable, whom he had known since he was a child of five; with whom he had gone to pantomimes, exhibitions, and such like junketings when he was a boy; who had first guided his reluctant feet through the mazes of the law; who had stood with him by his father's death-bed; who was bound to him by all the intimacies of a lifetime; on whose devotion he had counted as unquestioningly as a child on his mother's love—Marrable to be a rogue and a rascal, not a man at his wit's end yielding to a sudden temptation, but a deliberate, systematic villain—it was all but unthinkable. Yet here were irrefragable proofs, as the law took its course. And all through the nightmare time that followed until the trial—for the poor fugitive was soon hunted down and haled back to London—when his days were spent in helpless examination of confusing figures and bewildering transactions, the insoluble human problem was uppermost in his mind. How could the man have done these

things? Marrable had sobbed over his father's grave and had put his arm affectionately round his shoulders and led him away to the mourning coach. Marrable had stood with him by another open grave, that of his dead wife, and had comforted him with affectionate sympathy. To the very end not a sinister look had appeared in his honest, capable eyes. On the very day of his flight he had lunched with Quixtus in the Savoy grill-room. He had laughed and jested and told Quixtus a funny story or two. When they parted:

"Shall I see you at the office this afternoon? No? Well, good-bye, Ephraim. God bless you."

He had smiled and waved a cheery hand. How could a man shower upon another his tears, his sympathy, his laughter, his implied loyalty, his blessings, and all the time be a treacherous scoundrel working his ruin? All his knowledge of Prehistoric Man would not answer the question.

"I wonder whether there are many people in the world like Marrable?" he questioned.

And from that moment he began to look at all clear-eyed, honest folk and speculate, in a dreary way, whether they were like Marrable.

The family honour being imperilled, duty summoned him to an interview with Matthew Quixtus, his father's elder brother, the head of the family, and owner of a large estate at Croxton, in Devonshire, and other vast possessions. He paid him a week-end visit. The old man, nearly ninety, received him with every mark of courtesy. He went out of his way to pay deference to him as a man of high position in the learned world. Instead of the "Mr. Ephraim," which had been his designation in the house ever since the "Master Ephraim" had been dropped in the dim past, it was pointedly as "Dr. Quixtus" that butler and coachman and the rest of the house-

hold heard him referred to. Quixtus, who had always regarded his uncle as a fiery ancient, hot with family pride and quick to quarrel on the point of honour, was greatly relieved by his unexpected suavity of demeanour. He listened to his nephew's account of the great betrayal with a kindly smile, and wasted upon him bottles of the precious '54 port which the butler, with appropriate ritual, only brought up for the Inner Brotherhood of Dionysus. On all previous occasions, Ephraim, at whose deplorably uncultivated palate the old man had shrugged pitying shoulders, had been treated to an unconsidered vintage put upon the table after dinner rather as a convention than (in the host's opinion) as a liquid fit for human throttle. He was sympathetic over the disaster and alluded to Marrable in picturesquely old-world terms of depreciation.

"It'll cost you a pretty penny, one way or the other," said he.

"I shall have to make good the losses. I dare say I can make arrangements extending over a period of years."

"Fly kites, eh? Well, I shan't live for ever. But I'm not dead yet. By George, sir, no!" and his poor old hand shook pitifully as he raised his glass to his lips. "My grandfather—your great grandfather lived to be a hundred and four."

"It will be a matter of pride and delight to all who know you," said Quixtus, smiling and bowing, glass in hand, across the table, "if you champion the modern world and surpass him in longevity."

"The property will come in very handy, though, won't it?" asked the old man.

"I confess," said Quixtus, "that, if I pay the liabilities out of my own resources, I may be somewhat embarrassed."

"And what will you do with yourself when you've shut up the shop?"

"I shall devote myself more closely to my favourite pursuits."

The old man nodded and finished his glass of port.

"A damned gentlemanly occupation," said he, "without any confounded modern commercialism about it."

Quixtus was pleased. Hitherto his uncle had not regarded his anthropological studies with too sympathetic an eye. He had lived, all his life, a country gentleman, looking shrewdly after his estates, building cottages, draining fields, riding to hounds and shooting all things that were to be shot in their season. In science and scholarship he took no interest. It was therefore all the more gratifying to Quixtus to hear his studious scheme of life so heartily commended. The end of the visit was marked by the same amenity as the beginning, and Quixtus returned to town somewhat strengthened for the ordeal that lay before him.

Up to the time of the trial he had met with nothing but the kindly sympathy of friends and the courteous addressing of those with whom he came into business relations. His first battering against the sharp and merciless edges of the world took place in open court. He stood in the witness-box a lone, piteous spectacle, a Saint Sebastian among witnesses, unsaved by miraculous interposition, like the lucky Sebastian, from personal discomfort. That he was an upright, sensitive gentleman mattered nothing to judge and counsel; just as the fact of Sebastian's being a goodly and gallant youth did not affect his would-be executioners. At every barb shot at him by judge and counsel he quivered visibly. They were within their rights. In their opinion, he deserved to quiver. At the back of their legal minds they were all kindly gentlemen, and

out of court had human minds like yours and mine—but in their legal minds, Judge, Counsel for the Prosecution, Counsel for the Defence, all considered Quixtus a fortunate man in being in the witness-box at all; he ought to have been in the dock. There had never been such fantastically culpable negligence. He did not know this; he had not inquired into that; such a transaction he had just been aware of, but never understood; he had not examined the documents in question. Everything brought him by Marrable for signature, he signed as a matter of course, without looking at it.

"If Mr. Marrable had brought you a cheque for £20,000 drawn in his favour on your own private bankers, would you have signed it?" asked Counsel.

"Certainly," said Quixtus.

"Why?"

"I should not have looked at it."

"But supposing the writing on the cheque had, as it were, leaped to your eyes?"

"I should have taken it for granted that it had to do with the legitimate business of the firm."

"If that is the case," remarked the judge, "I don't think that men like you ought to be allowed to go about loose."

Whereat there arose laughter in court, and sudden, hellish hatred of judges in the heart of Quixtus.

"Can you give the court any reason why you drifted into such criminal carelessness?" asked Counsel.

"It never entered my head to doubt my partner's integrity."

"Do you carry this childlike faith in human nature into all departments of life?"

"Up to now I have had no reason to distrust my fellow creatures."

"I congratulate you as a solicitor on having had a unique experience," said the judge acidly.

Counsel continued. "I put it to you—suppose two or three plausible strangers told you a glittering tale, and one asked you to entrust him with a hundred pounds to show your confidence in him—would you do it?"

"I am not in the habit of consorting with vulgar strangers," retorted Quixtus, with twitching lip.

"Which means that you are too learned and lofty a person to deal with the common clay of this low world?"

"I cannot deal with you," said Quixtus.

Counsel grew red and angry, as there was laughter in which the judge joined.

"The witness," said the latter, "is not quite such a fool as he would give us to imagine, Mr. Smithers."

Thus the only blow that Quixtus could give was turned against him. Also, Counsel, smarting under the hit, mishandled him severely, so that at the end of his examination he stepped down from the witness-box, less a man than a sentient bruise. He remained in court till the very end, deathly pale, pain in his eyes, and his mouth drawn into the lines of that of a child about to cry. The trial proceeded. There was no doubt of the guilt of the miserable wretch in the dock. The judge summed up, and it was then that he said the devastating things about Quixtus that inflamed his newly born hatred of judges to such an extent that it henceforth blackened his candid and benevolent soul. The jury gave their verdict without retiring, and Marrable, at the age of sixty, was condemned to seven years' penal servitude.

Quixtus left the court dazed and broken. He was met in the corridor by Tommy, who gripped him by the arm, led him down into the street and put him

into a cab. He had not been in court, being a boy of delicate feelings.

"You must buck up, you know," he said to the silent, grey-faced man beside him. "It will all come right. What you want now is a jolly stiff brandy-and-soda."

Quixtus smiled faintly. "I think I do," said he.

A few minutes later Tommy superintended the taking of his prescription in the dining-room in Russell Square, and eyed Quixtus triumphantly as he set down the empty glass.

"There! That'll set you straight. There's nothing like it."

Quixtus held out his hand. "You're a good boy, Tommy. Thanks for taking care of me. I'll be all right now."

"Don't you think I might be of some use if I stayed? It's a bit lonesome here."

"I have a big box of stuff from the valley of the Dordogne, which I haven't opened yet," said Quixtus. "I was saving it up for this evening, so I shan't be lonesome."

"Well, be sure to have a good dinner and a bottle of fizz," said Tommy. After which sage counsel he went reluctantly away.

Just as Clementina was sitting down to dinner Tommy rushed in with a crumpled evening newspaper in his hand, incoherent with rage. Had she seen the full report? What did she think of it? How dared they say such things of a high-minded honourable gentleman? Counsel on both sides were a disgrace to the bar, the judge a blot on the bench. They ought not to be allowed to cumber the earth. They ought to be shot on sight. Out West they would never have left the court alive. Had he lived in a simpler age,

or in a more primitive society, the young Paladin would have gone forth and slaughtered them in the bosom of their families. Fortunately, all he could do by way of wreaking his vengeance was to tear the newspaper in half, throw it on the floor, and stamp on it.

"Feel better?" asked Clementina, who had listened to his heroics rather sourly. "If so, sit down and have some food."

But Tommy declined nourishment. He was too sore to eat. His young spirit revolted against the injustice of the world. It clamoured for sympathy.

"Say you think it damnable."

"Anything to do with the law is always damnable," said Clementina. "You shouldn't put yourself within its clutches. Please pass me the potatoes."

Tommy handed her the dish. "I believe you're as hard as nails, Clementina."

"All right, believe it," she replied grimly. And she would not say more, for in what she thought was her heart she agreed with the judge.

CHAPTER IV

QUIXTUS was still bowing his head over the dishonoured grave of "Quixtus and Son" when the second thunder-bolt fell. The public disgrace drove a temperamentally hermit-like nature into more rigid seclusion. He resigned his presidency of the Anthropological Society. The Council met and unanimously refused to accept his resignation. They wrote in such terms that he could not do otherwise than yield. But he gave up his attendance at their meetings. To a man, his friends among the learned professed their sympathy. It hurt rather than healed. Those who wrote received courteous and formal replies. Those who knocked at his door were refused admittance. Even Clementina, repenting of her harshness and pitying the lonely and helpless man, pinned on a shameless thing that had once resembled a hat, and went up by omnibus to Russell Square, only to find the door closed against her. The woman thus scorned became the fury which, according to the poet, is unknown in Hades. She expressed her opinion of Quixtus pretty freely. But Quixtus shrank from her as he shrank from every one, as he even shrank from his own servants. These he dismissed, with the exception of Mrs. Pennycook, his housekeeper, who, since the death of his wife had held a high position of trust in his household, and a vague female of humble and heterogeneous appearance, who lived out, and had the air of apologising for inability to squeeze through the wall when he passed by. In view of he knew not what changes in his immediate

financial circumstances, economy, he said, was desirable. He also shut up the greater part of the big house, finding a dim sort of pleasure in such retrenchment. He lived in his museum at the back, ate his meals in the little dark room at the head of the kitchen stairs, and changed his luxurious bedroom for a murky, cheerless little chamber adjoining the museum. When a man takes misery for a bride he may be forgiven for exaggeration in his early transports.

Only on Tuesday nights did he throw open dining-room and drawing-room, where he received Huckaby, Vandermeer, and Billiter as in the past. To them his smile and his old self were given. Indeed he found a newer sympathy with them. He, even as they, had been the victim of outrageous fortune. He, too, had suffered from the treachery of man and the insolence of office. The three found an extra guerdon in their great-coat pockets.

There were times, however, when the museum grew wearisome through familiarity, when he found no novelty in the Quaternary skull from Silesia, or the engraved reindeers on the neolithic axe-heads, or the necklet of the lady of the bronze age; when he craved things nearer to his own time which could give him some message of modernity. On such occasions he would either walk abroad, or if the weather were foul, take a childish pleasure in exploring the sealed chambers of the house. For, shut up a room, exclude from it the light of day, cover the furniture with dust-sheets till you get the semblance of a morgue of strange beasts, forget it for a while, and, on re-entering it, you will have all the elements of mystery which gradually and agreeably gives place to little pleasant shocks of discovery of the familiar. The neglected pictures that have hung on the walls, the huddled knick-knacks on a table, the heap of books on

the floor, all have messages of gentle reproach. A newspaper of years ago, wrapped round a cushion, once opened by eager hands and containing in its headlines world-shaking news (now so stale and forgotten) is a pathetic object. In drawers are garments out of date, preserved heaven knows why, keepsakes worked by fair hands, unused but negligently treasured, faded curtains which will never be rehung—a thousand old stimulating things, down to ends of sealing-wax and carefully rolled bits of twine. And some drawers are empty, and from them rises the odour of lavender poignant with memories of the things that are no more.

It was a large, old-fashioned house which had been his father's before him, in which he had been born; and it was full of memories. In the recess of a dark cupboard in one of the attics he found a glass jar, which had escaped the vigilance or commanded the respect of generations of housemaids, covered with a parchment on which was written in his mother's hand, "Damson Jam." His mother had died a quarter of a century ago.

An old hair-trunk in the corner of the box-room, such a hair-trunk as the boldest man during Quixtus's lifetime would have shrunk from having attached to him on his travels, contained correspondence of his grandfather's and old daguerrotypes and photographs of stiff, staring, faded people long since gone to a (let us hope) more becomingly attired world. There was a miniature on ivory, villainously painted, of a chubby red-cheeked child, and on the back was written "My Son Mathew, aged two years and six months." Could the shrivelled, myriad-wrinkled, palsied old man whom Ephraim had visited but a short while since ever have remotely resembled this? The hair-trunk also contained a pistol with a label "Car-

ried by my father at Waterloo." That was the old gentleman who had lived to a hundred and four. Why had this relic of family honour remained hidden all his life?

The more he searched into odd corners the more did his discoveries stimulate his interest. Of his own life he found records in unexpected places. A bundle of school-reports. He opened it at random, and his eye fell upon the Headmaster's Report at the foot of a sheet; "Studious but unpractical. It seems impossible to arouse in him a sense of ambition, or even of the responsibilities of life." He smiled somewhat wistfully and put the bundle in his pocket with a view to the further acquisition of self-knowledge. A set of Cambridge college bills tied with red tape, a broken microscope, a case of geometrical drawing instruments, a manuscript book of early poems, mimetic echoes of Keats, Tennyson, Shelley, Swinburne, who were all clamouring together in his brain, his college blazer, much moth-eaten, his Heidelberg student's cap, ditto. . . . *Ah! qu'ils sont loin ces jours si regrettés!* . . .

Of his wife, too, there were almost forgotten relics. An oak chest opened unexpectedly disclosed a pair of little pink satin slippers standing wistfully on the top of the tissue paper that protected the dresses beneath. The key was in the lock. He closed the lid reverently, locked the chest, and put the key in his pocket. They had had together five years of placid happiness. She was a sweet, white-winged soul—Angela. Her little boudoir on the second floor had not been used since her death, and was much as she had left it. Only the dust-sheets and the gloom invested it in a more ghostly atmosphere than other less sacred chambers. Her work-basket stood by the window. He opened it and found it still contained

a reel of thread and a needle-case stuck full of rusty needles. On the wall hung an enlarged portrait of himself at the age of thirty—he was not quite so lantern-jawed then, and his hair was thicker on the top. A water-colour sketch of Angela hung over the oak bureau, at which she used to write her dinner-notes and puzzle her pretty head over household accounts. He drew up the blind so as to see the picture more clearly. Yes. It was like her. Dark-haired, fragile, with liquid brown eyes. There was just that dimple in her chin. . . . He remembered it so well; but, strangely, it had played no part in his customary mental picture of her. In the rediscovery of the dimple he found a vague melancholy pleasure. . . . Idly he drew down the slanting lids of the bureau, and pulled out the long narrow drawers that supported it underneath. The interior was empty. He recollected now that he had cleared it of its contents when settling Angela's affairs after her death. He thrust up the slanting lid, pushed back the long right-hand drawer, pushed the left hand one. It stuck. He tried to ease it in, but it was jammed. He pulled it out with a jerk, and found that the cause of the jam was a letter flat against the end of the drawer with a corner turned over the edge. He took out the letter, closed the drawers, and smiled sadly, glad to have discovered a new relic of Angela in the bureau—probably a gossiping note from a friend, perhaps one from himself. He went to the light of the window.

"*My adored heart's dearest and most beloved angel*"—so the letter began. He scanned the words bewildered. Certainly in his wildest dreams he had never imagined such a form of address. Besides, the handwriting was not his. He turned the sheet rapidly and glanced at the end; "*God! How I love you.* WILL."

"Will? Will Hammersley. It was Will Hammersley's handwriting. What did it mean? He paused for a few moments, breathing hard, looking with blind eyes through the window over the square. At last he read the letter. Then he thrust it, a crumpled ball, into his pocket and reeled out of the room like a drunken man, down the stairs of the lonely house, and flung himself into a chair in his museum, where he sat for hours staring before him, paralysed with an awful dismay.

At five o'clock his housekeeper entered with the tea-things. He did not want tea. At seven she came again into the large dark room lit only by the red glow of the fire.

"The gentlemen are here, sir."

It was a Tuesday evening. He had forgotten.

He stumbled to his feet.

"All right," he said.

Then he shivered, feeling a deadly sickness of soul. No, he could not meet his fellow creatures to-night.

"Give them my compliments and apologies, and say I am unwell and unable to dine with them this evening. See that they have all they want, as usual."

"Very good, sir—but yourself? I'm sorry you are ill, sir. What can I bring you?"

"Nothing," said Quixtus harshly. "Nothing. And please don't trouble me any more."

Mrs. Pennycook regarded him in some astonishment, not having heard him speak in such a tone before. Probably no one else had, since he had learned to speak.

"If you're not better in the morning, sir, I might fetch the doctor."

He turned in his chair. "Go. I tell you. Go. Leave me alone."

Later he rose and switched on the light and, mechanically descending to the hall, like a sleep-walker, deposited his usual largesse in the pockets of the three seedy, familiar overcoats. Then he went up to his museum again. The effort, however, had cleared his mind. He reflected. He had not been very well of late. There were such things as hallucinations, to which men broken down by mental strain were subject. Let him read the letter through once more. He took the crumpled paper from his pocket, smoothed it out and read. No. There was no delusion. The whole story was there—the treachery, the faithlessness, the guilty passion that gloried in its repeated consummation. His wife Angela, his friend Will Hammersley—the only woman and the only man he had ever loved. A sudden memory smote him. He had entrusted her to Hammersley's keeping times out of number.

"My God!" said he, beating his forehead with a clenched fist. "My God!"

And so fell the second thunderbolt.

Towards midnight there came a heavy knocking at his door. Startled by the unusual sound he cried:

"What's that? Who's there?"

The door opened and Eustace Huckaby lurched solemnly into the room. His ruffled hair stood up on end like a cockatoo's crest, and his watery eyes glistened. He pulled his straggling beard.

"Sorry ole' man to hear you're seedy. Came to know—how—getting on."

Quixtus rose, a new sternness on his face, and confronted the intruder.

"Huckaby, you're drunk."

Huckaby laughed and waved a protesting hand, thereby nearly losing his balance.

"No," said he. "Rid'klous. I'm not drunk.

Other fellows are—drunk ash owls—tha's why—couldn't come see you. They're not qui' sort of men been acushtomed to assochate with—I'm—University man—like you Quishtus—sometime Fellow Corpus Christi College, Cambridge—I first gave motto for club—didn't I? *Procul, O procul este profani*—tha's Latin. Other two lobsters don't know word of Latin—ignorant as lobsters—lobsters—tha's wha' I call 'em." He lurched heavily into a chair. "Awful thirsty. Got a drink old f'la?"

"No," said Quixtus. "I haven't. And if I had, I wouldn't give it to you."

The reprobate pondered darkly over the announcement. Then he hiccoughed, and his face brightened.

"Look here, dear old frien'——"

Quixtus interrupted him.

"Do you mean to tell me those other men are drunk too?"

"As owls—you go down—see 'em."

He threw back his head and broke out into sudden shrill laughter. Then, checking himself, he said with an awful gravity:

"I beg your pardon, Quishtus. Their conduc's disgrace—humanity."

"You three have dined in this house once a week for years, and no one has left it the worse for liquor. And now, the first time I leave you to yourselves—I was really not able to join you to-night—you take advantage of my absence, and——"

Huckaby staggered to his feet and tried to lay his hand on Quixtus's shoulder. Having recovered himself, he put it on top of a case of prehistoric implements.

"That's just what I want—explain to you. They're lobsters, dear ole' friend—just lobsters—all claw and belly and no heart. I'm a University man like you.

Corpush Christi College, Cambridge—They're not friends of yours. They're lobsters. Ruddy lobsters. I'm not drunk you know. I'm all right. I'm telling you——"

Quixtus took him by the arm. "I think you had better go away, Huckaby."

"No. Send other fellows away. I'm your frien'," said he, pointing a shaky forefinger. "I want to tell you. I'm a University man and so are you, and I don't care how much you made out of it. You're all right Quishtus. I'm your frien'. Other lobsters said at dinner that if justice were done you'd be in quod."

Quixtus took the gaunt sot by the shoulders and shook him. "What the devil do you mean?"

"Don't, don't—don't upset good dinner," said Huckaby wriggling away. "You won't believe I'm your friend. Van and Billiter say you were in with Parable—Paramour—wha's his name? all the time, and it's just your rosy luck that you weren't doing time too. Now I don't care if you did stand in with Parachute—'tisn't my business. But I'll stan' by you. I, Eustace Huckaby, Master of Arts, sometime Fellow of Corpush Christi College, Cambridge. There'sh my hand."

He extended it, but Quixtus regarded it not.

"The three of you have not contented yourselves with getting drunk, but you've been slandering me behind my back—foully slandering me."

He went to the door and flung it open. "I think it's time, Huckaby, that we joined the others."

Huckaby shambled down the stairs, murmuring of lobsters and parables, and turning every now and then to assure his host that adverse circumstances made no difference to his imperishable affection; and so they reached the dining-room. Huckaby had spoken truly. Billiter was sprawling back in his chair, his

coat and waistcoat covered with cigar-ash; his bald head was crowned by the truncated cone of a candle-shade (a jest of Huckaby's) which gave him an appearance that would have been comic to a casual observer, but to Quixtus was peculiarly obscene. His dazed eyes were fixed stupidly on Vandermeer who, the picture of woe, was weeping bitterly because he had no one to love him. At the sight of Quixtus, Billiter made an effort to rise, but fell back heavily on to his seat, the candle-shade falling likewise. He muttered hoarsely and incoherently that it was the confounded gout again in his ankles. Then he expressed a desire to slumber. Vandermeer raised a maudlin face.

"No one to love me," he whined, and tried to pour from an empty decanter; it slipped from his hand and broke a glass. "Not even a drop of consolation left," he said.

"Disgrashful, isn't it?" said Huckaby with a hiccough.

Quixtus eyed them with disgust. Humanity was revolting. He turned to Huckaby and said with a shudder: "For God's sake, take them away."

Huckaby summed them up with an unsteady but practised eye. "Can't walk. Ruddy lobsters. Must have cabs."

Quixtus went to the street-door and whistled up a couple of four-wheelers from the rank; and eventually, by the aid of Huckaby and the cabmen whom he had to bribe heavily to drive the wretches home, they were deposited in some sort of sitting posture each in a separate vehicle. As soon as the sound of the departing wheels died away, Quixtus held out Huckaby's overcoat.

"You're sober enough to walk," said he, helping him on with it. "Good-night."

Huckaby turned on the doorstep.

"Want you to remember—don't care damn what a frien' has done—ever want help, come to me, sometime Fellow of Corp——"

Quixtus closed the street door in his face and heard no more. These were his friends; these the men who had lived on his bounty, who, for years, for what they could get, had controlled their knavery, their hypocrisy. These were the men for whom he had striven, these sots, these dogs, these vulgar-hearted, slandering knaves! His very soul was sick. He paused at the dining-room door and for a moment looked at the scene of the debauch. Wine and coffee were spilled; glasses broken; a lighted stump of cigar had burned a great brown hole in the tablecloth. He grimly imagined the tipsy scene. If he had been with them, there would have been smug faces, deprecating hands upheld at the second round of the port, talk on art, literature, religion, and what-not, and, at parting, whispered blessings and fervent handshakes; and all the time there would have been slanderous venom in their hearts, and the raging beast of drink within them cursing him for his repressing presence.

"The canting rogues," he murmured as he went back to his museum. "The canting rogues!"

He thrust his hands, in a gesture of anger and disgust, deep into his jacket-pockets. His knuckles came against the crumpled letter. He turned faint and clung to the newel-post on the landing for support. The smaller treachery coming close before his eyes had for the time eclipsed the greater.

"My God," he said, "is all the world against me?"

Unfortunately there was a thunderbolt or two yet to fall.

CHAPTER V

"TO my nephew Ephraim for his soul's good I bequeath my cellar of wine which I adjure him to drink with care, thought, diligence, and appreciation, being convinced that a sound judge of wine is, or is on the way to becoming what my nephew is not, a judge of men and affairs."

Quixtus stared at the ironical words written in Mathew Quixtus's sharp precise handwriting, and turned with a grey face to the lawyer who had pointed them out.

"Is that the only reference to me in the will, Mr. Henslow?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, yes, Dr. Quixtus. You can see for yourself." He handed Quixtus the document.

Mathew Quixtus had bequeathed large sums of money to charities, smaller sums to old servants, the wine to Ephraim, and the residue of his estate to a Quixtus unknown to Ephraim, save by hearsay, who had settled thirty years before in New York. Even Tommy Burgrave, with whom he had been on good terms, was not mentioned. But he had quarrelled years before with his niece, Tommy's mother, for making an impecunious marriage, and, to do him justice, had never promised the boy anything. The will was dated a few weeks back, and had been witnessed by the butler and the coachman.

"I should like you to understand, Dr. Quixtus," said Henslow, "that until we found that envelope I had no idea that your uncle had made a fresh will.

I came here with the old one in my hand, which I drew up and which has been in my office-safe for fifteen years. Under that, I need not tell you, you were, with the exception of a few trifling legacies, the sole legatee. I am deeply grieved."

"Let me see that date again," said Quixtus.

He pressed his hands to his eyes and thought. It was the day before his arrival on his last visit.

The telegram announcing Mathew Quixtus's sudden death had brought a gleam of light into a soul which for a week had been black with misery. It awakened him to a sense of outer things. A sincere affection for the old man had been a lifelong habit. It was a shock to realise that he was no longer alive. Besides having always unconsciously taken a child's view of death, he felt genuinely sorry, for his uncle's sake, that he should have died. Impulses of pity, tenderness, regret, stirred in his deadened heart. He forthwith set out for Devonshire, and when he arrived at Croxton, stood over the pinched waxen face till the tears came into his eyes.

He had summoned Tommy Burgrave, the only other member of the family in England, but Tommy had not been able to attend. He had caught cold while painting in the open air, and was in bed with a slight attack of congestion of the lungs. Quixtus was alone in the great house. With the aid of Henslow he made the funeral arrangements. The old man was laid to rest in the quiet churchyard of Croxton. Half the county came to pay their tribute to his memory, and shook Quixtus by the hand. Then he came back to the house, and in the presence of one or two of the old servants, the will was read.

It had been dated the day before his arrival on his last visit. The thing had been written and signed and witnessed and sealed, and was lying in that locked

drawer in the library all the time that the old man was welcoming him, flattering him, showing him deference. All the suavity and deference had been mockery. The old man had made him a notorious geck and gull.

His pale blue eyes hardened, and he turned an expressionless face to the lawyer.

"I'm afraid it would not be possible," said Henslow, "to have the will set aside on the ground of, say —senility—on the part of the testator."

"My uncle had every faculty at its keenest when he wrote it," said Quixtus, "including that of merciless cruelty."

"It was a heartless jest," the lawyer agreed.

"If you will do me a service, Mr. Henslow, you might be kind enough to instruct one of the servants to pack up my bag and forward it to my London address. I am going now to the railway station."

The lawyer looked at his watch and put out a detaining hand.

"There's not a decent train for two or three hours."

"I would rather," said Quixtus, "ride a tortoise home than stay in this house another moment."

He walked out of the room and out of the house, and after waiting at the station whence he despatched a telegram to his housekeeper, who was not expecting him back for two or three days, took the first train—a slow one—to London.

In his corner of the railway carriage the much-afflicted man sat motionless, brooding. Everything had happened that could shake to its foundations a man's faith in humanity, and swallow it up in abysmal darkness. Suddenly, as though by a prearranged design—as we know was the case with his forerunner in the Land of Uz—cataclysm after cataclysm had

revealed to him the essential baseness, treachery, cruelty of mankind. For in his eyes these were proved to be essential qualities. Had they not been revealed to him, not by fitful gleams, but in one steady lurid glare, in the nature of those who had been nearest to him in the world—Angela, Will Hammersley, Marrable, Huckaby, Vandermeer, Billiter, Mathew Quixtus? If the same hell-streak ran through the souls of these, surely it must run through the souls of all the sons and daughters of Adam. Now here came the great puzzle. Why should he, Ephraim Quixtus, (as far as he could tell) vary from the unkindly race of man? Why hitherto had baseness, treachery, and cruelty been as foreign to his nature as an overpowering inclination towards arson or homicide? Why had he been unequipped with these qualities which appeared to serve mortals as weapons wherewith to fight the common battle of life? The why, he could not tell. That he had them not, was obvious. That he had gone to the wall through lack of them was obvious, too. Instead of the dagger of baseness, the sword of cruelty, the shield of treachery, all finely-tempered implements of war, he had been fighting with the wooden lath of virtue and the brawn-buckler of trust. Armed as he should have been, he would have out manœuvred Marrable at his own game, kept his wife in chaste and wholesome terror of his jealousy, sent Huckaby and Company long since to the limbo where they belonged, deluded his uncle into the belief that he was a devil of a fellow, and now be standing with flapping wings and crowing voice triumphant on this dunghill of a world. But he had been hopelessly outmatched. Whoever had taken upon himself the responsibility of equipping him for the battle of life had been guilty of incredible negligence. But on whom could he call to remedy this defect? Men

called on the Unknown God to make them good; but it would be idiotic as well as blasphemous to call on Him to make one bad. How, then, were the essential qualities of baseness, treachery, and cruelty to be captured and brought into his armoury? Perhaps the Devil might help. But we are so matter-of-fact and scientific in these days that even the simple soul of Quixtus could not quite believe in his existence. If he had lived in the Middle Ages (so in scholarly gloom ran his fancy) he could have drawn circles and pentagrams and things on the floor, and uttered the incantations, and all the hierarchy of hell would have been at his command, Satanas, Lucifer, Mephistopheles, Asmodeus, Samael, Asael, Beelzebub, Azazel, Macathiel. . . . Quixtus rather leaned towards Macathiel—the name suggested a merciless, bowelless, high-cheek-boned devil in a kilt——

Impatiently he shook his thoughts free from the fantastic channel into which they had wandered and brought them back into the ever-thickening slough of his soul. The train lumbered on, stopping at pretty wayside stations where fresh-faced folk with awkward gait and soft deep voices clattered cheerily past Quixtus's windows on their way to or from the third-class carriages, or at the noisier, bustling stations of large towns. Now and then a well-dressed traveller invaded his solitude for a short distance. But Quixtus sat in his remote corner seeing, hearing nothing, brooding on the baseness, treachery, and cruelty of mankind. He had come to the end of love, the end of trust, the end of friendship. When the shapes of those who were still loyal to him flitted across his darkened fancy he cursed them in his heart. They were as corrupt as the rest. That they had not been found out in their villainy only proved a thicker mask of hypocrisy. He had finished with them all. If

he had been a more choleric man gifted with the power of picturesque vehemence of language he might have outrivalled Timon of Athens in the denunciations of his fellows. It must be a relief to any one in such a frame of mind to stand up and, with violent gestures, express his views in terms of sciatica, itches, blains, leprosy, venomed worms and ulcerous sores, and to call upon the blessed breeding sun to draw from the earth rotten humidity, and below his sister's orb to infect the air. He knows exactly what he feels, gives it full artistic expression, and finds himself all the better for it. But Quixtus, inarticulate, had no such comfort. Indeed, he could hardly have expressed the welter of horror, hate, and misery that was his moral being, in any form of speech whatever. As the train rumbled on, the phrase " Evil be thou my good " wove itself into the rhythm of the machinery. He let it sing dully and stupidly in his ears, and his mind worked subconsciously back to Macathiel.

As yet he had imagined no future attitude towards life. His soul was in a state of negation. The insistent invocation of Evil was but a catchword, irritating his brain and having no real significance. At the most he envisaged the future as a period of inactive misanthropy and suspicion. He had as yet no stirrings to action. On the other hand, he did not, like Job, after the first series of afflictions, rend his clothes, shave his head, and bear his reverses with pious resignation.

The train arrived an hour late, as slow trains are apt to do, and it was nearly half-past eleven when he reached his house in Russell Square. He opened the door with his latchkey. The hall was dark, contrary to custom. He switched on the light, and, turning, saw that the letter-box had not been cleared. Mechanically he took out the letters, and beneath the

hall lamp glanced at the outside of the envelopes. Among them was the telegram he had sent from Devonshire.

Even a man wallowing in the deepest abysses of spiritual misery needs food; and when he finds that a telegram ordering supper (for his return was unexpected) has not been opened, he may be pardoned purely material disappointment and irritation. Mrs. Pennycook, the housekeeper, must have profited by his absence to take a holiday. But what business had she to take a holiday and leave the house uncared for at that time of night? For, if she had returned, she would have lit the hall-light, and cleared the letter-box. He resigned himself peevishly to the prospect of a biscuit and a whisky-and-soda in the little back room where he ate his meals.

He strode down the passage to the head of the kitchen stairs and opened the study door. A glare of light met his eyes, and a moment afterwards something else. This was Mrs. Pennycook in an armchair, sleeping a bedraggled sleep with two empty quart bottles of champagne and an empty bottle of whisky by her side. He shook her hard by the shoulders, but beyond stertorous and jerky breaths the blissful lady showed no signs of animation.

It was then that a constricting thread snapped in Quixtus's brain. It was then, as if by a trick of magic, that all the vaguely billowing horrors, disillusions, disgusts, resentments and hatreds co-ordinated themselves into a scheme of fierce vividness.

Just as the boils made Job, who had borne the annihilation of his family with equanimity, open his mouth and curse his day, so did a drunken servant, who neglected to give him his supper, awaken Ephraim Quixtus to the glorious thrill of a remorseless, relentless malignity.

He threw up his hands and laughed aloud, peals of unearthly laughter that woke the echoes of the empty house, that woke the canary in its cage by the window, causing it to utter a few protesting "cheeps," that arrested the policeman on his beat outside, that did everything human laughter in the way of noise can do, even stimulating the blissful lady to open half a glazed eye for the fraction of a second. After his paroxysm had subsided, he looked at the woman for a moment, and then with an air of peculiar malevolence took a sheet of note-paper from a small writing-table beneath the canary's cage and wrote on it:

"*Let me never see your face again.—E. Q.*"

This, by the aid of a hairpin that had fallen into her lap, he pinned to her apron. Then, with another laugh, he left her beneath the glare of the light, and went out into the street. He was thrilled, like a drunken man, with a new sense of life. Years had fallen from his shoulders. He had solved the riddle of the world. Baseness, treachery, cruelty he felt them pulsating in his heart with a maddening joy of existence. Evil was his good. He was no longer even a base, treacherous, cruel man. He was a devil incarnate. The long exultant years in front of him would be spent in deeds of shame and crime and unprecedented wickedness. If there was a throne to be waded to through slaughter, through slaughter would he wade to it. He would shut the gates of Mercy on mankind. He held out both hands in front of him with stiffened outspread fingers. If only there was a human throat between them, how they would close around it, how he would gloat over the dying agony! Caligula was the man for him. He regretted his untimely death. What a colleague could have been made of the fiend who wished that the whole human race had one neck so that it could be severed at one blow!

He had reached this stage in his exultant reflections when he found himself outside a restaurant which he had never entered, at the Oxford Street end of the Tottenham Court Road. He remembered that he was hungry; that a new-born spirit of wickedness must be fed. He went in, unconscious of the company or the surroundings, and ordered supper. The waiter said that it was nearly closing time. Quixtus called for a plate of cold beef and a whisky-and-soda. He devoured the meat ravenously, forgetful of the bread by his side, and drank the drink at a gulp. Having lit a cigar, he threw half a sovereign on the table and walked out. He walked along the streets heedless of direction, down Shaftesbury Avenue, across Piccadilly Circus blazing with light, through Leicester Square, along the still hurrying Strand to Fleet Street noiseless and empty, his brain on fire, weaving exquisite fabrics of deviltry. Suddenly he halted on a glorious thought. Why should he not begin there and then? The whole of London, with its crime and sin and rottenness, lay before him. He retraced his steps back to the Babylon of the West. What could he do? Where could he find adequate wickedness? When he reached Charing Cross again it was dark and deserted. A square mile of London has every night about an hour of tearing, surging, hectic life. Then all of a sudden the thousands of folk are swept away to the four corners of the mighty city, and all is still. A woman, as Quixtus passed, quickened her pace and murmured words. Here was a partner in wickedness to his hand. But the flesh of the delicately fibred man revolted simultaneously with the thought. No. That did not come within his scheme of wickedness. He slipped a coin into the woman's palm, because she looked so forlorn, and went his way. She was useless for his purpose. What he sought was some occasion

for pitilessness, for doing evil to his fellow-creatures. A fine rain began to fall; but he heeded it not, burning with the sense of adventure. A reminiscence of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde crossed his mind. Hyde, like Caligula, was also the man for him. Didn't he once throw a child down in a lonely street and stamp on it?

He walked and walked through the now silent places, and the more he walked the less opening for wickedness did he see. The potentialities of Babylon appeared to him overrated. After a wild and aimless detour he found himself again at Charing Cross. He struck down Whitehall. But in Whitehall and Parliament Street, the stately palaces on either side, vast museums of an Empire's decorum, forbade the suggestion of wickedness. The belated omnibuses and cabs that passed along were invested with a momentary hush of respectability. He turned up the Thames Embankment and saw the mass of the great buildings with here and there patches of lighted windows showing above the tree-tops of the gardens, the benches below filled with huddled sodden shapes of human misery, the broad silent thoroughfares, the parapet, the dimly flowing river below—a black mirror marked by streaks of light, reflections from lamps on parapet and bridges, the low-lying wharves on the opposite side swallowed up in blackness—and no attractive wickedness was apparent; nor was there any on the great bridge, disturbed only by the slow waggons mountains high bringing food for the insatiable multitude of London, and lumbering on in endless trail with an impressive fatefulness; nor even at the coffee-stall at the corner of the Waterloo Bridge Road, its damp little swarm of frequenters clustering to it like bees, their faces illuminated by the segment of light cast by the reflector at the back of the stall,

all harmlessly drinking cocoa or wistfully watching others drink it. For a moment he thought of joining the swarm, as some of the faces looked alluringly vile; but the inbred instinct of fastidiousness made him pass it by. He plunged into the unsavoury streets beyond. They were still and ghostly. All things diabolical could no doubt be found behind those silent windows; but at two o'clock in the morning sin is generally asleep, and sleeping sin and sleeping virtue are as alike as two pins. Meanwhile the fine rain fell unceasingly, and the Earnest Seeker after Wickedness began to feel wet and chilly.

This is a degenerate age. A couple of centuries ago Quixtus could have manned a ship with cutthroats, hoisted the skull and cross-bones, and become the Terror of the Seas. Or, at a more recent date, if he had been a Corsican he could have taken his gun and gone into the maquis and declared war on the island. If he had lived in the fourteenth century he could have become a condottiere after the fashion of the gentle Duke Guarnieri, who, wearing on his breast a silver badge with the inscription "The Enemy of God, of Pity, and of Mercy," gained for himself enviable unpopularity in Northern Italy. As a Malay, he could have taken a queerly curving, businesslike knife and run amuck, to his great personal satisfaction. In prehistoric times, he could have sat for a couple of delicious months in a cave, polishing and sharpening a beautiful axe-head, and, having fitted it to its haft, have gone forth and (probably skulking behind trees so as to get his victims in the rear) have had as gorgeous a time as was given to prehistoric man to imagine. But nowadays, who can do these delightful, vindictive, and misanthropical things with any feeling of security? If Quixtus, obeying a logically developed impulse, had slaughtered a young man

in evening dress in Piccadilly, he most indubitably would have been hung, to say nothing of being subjected to all the sordid procedure of a trial for murder.

Nor is this all. Owing to some flaw in our system of education, Quixtus had not been trained to deeds of violence; no one had even set before him the theoretical philosophy of the subject. You may argue, I am aware, that we use other weapons now than the cutlass of the pirate or the stone-axe of the quaternary age; we have the subtler vengeance of voice and pen, which can give a more exquisite finish to the devastation of human lives. But I would remind you that Quixtus, through the neglect of his legal studies and practice, was ignorant of the ordinary laws of chicane, and of the elementary principles of financial dishonesty that guided the nefariousness of folk like "Gehenna, Unlimited."

It must be admitted, therefore, that Quixtus entered on his career of depravity greatly handicapped.

The grey light of a hopeless May dawn was just beginning to outline the towers and spires of Westminster against the sky when Quixtus found himself by the Westminster Hospital. He was damp and chill, somewhat depressed. The thrill of adventure had passed away, leaving disappointment and a little disillusion in its place. He was also physically fatigued, and his shoulders and feet ached. One ghostly hansom-cab stood on the rank, the horse drooping its dejected head into a lean nosebag, the driver asleep inside. Quixtus resolved to arouse the man from his slumbers, and, abandoning the pursuit of evil for the night, drive home to Russell Square. But as he was crossing the road towards the vehicle, a miserable object, starting up from the earth, ran by his side and addressed him in a voice so hoarse that it scarcely rose above a whisper.

"For Gord's sake, guv'nor, spare a poor man a copper or two. I've not tasted food for twenty-four hours."

Quixtus stopped, his instinctive fingers diving into his pence-pocket. Suddenly an idea struck him.

"You must have led a very evil life," said he, "to have come to this stage of destitution."

"Watcher gettin' at?" growled the applicant, one eye fixed suspiciously on Quixtus's face, the other on the fumbling hand.

"I'm not going to preach to you—far from it," said Quixtus; "but I should like to know. You must have seen a great deal of wickedness in your time."

"If you arsk me," opined the man, "there's nothing but wickedness in this blankety blank world."

He did not say "blankety blank," but used other and more lurid epithets which, though they were not exactly the ones that Quixtus himself would have chosen, at least showed him that his companion and himself were agreed on their fundamental conception of the universe.

"If you will tell me where I can find some," he said, "I will give you half a crown."

A glimmer of astonished interest lit up the man's dull eyes. "Whatcher want to know for?"

"That's my business," said Quixtus.

The cabman, suddenly awakened, saw the possibility of a fare. He clambered out of the vehicle.

"Cab, sir?" he called across the road.

"Yes," said Quixtus.

"'Arf a crown?" said the battered man.

"Certainly," said Quixtus.

"Then I'll tell yer, guv'nor. I've been a bookie's tout, see? Not a slap-up bookie in the ring—but an outside one—one what did a bit of welshing when he could, see?—and what I say is, that I seed more wick-

edness there than anywhere else. If you want to see blankety blank wickedness you go on the turf." He cleared his throat, but his whisper had grown almost inaudible. "I've gone and lost my voice," he said.

Quixtus looked at the drenched, starved, voiceless, unshorn horror of a man standing outcast and dying of want and wickedness in the grey dawn, under the shadow of the central symbols of the pomp and majesty of England.

"You look very ill," said he.

"Consumpshon," breathed the man.

Quixtus shivered. The cabman, who had hastily dispossessed the dejected horse of the nosebag, had climbed into his dicky and was swinging the cab round.

"I thank you very much for your information," said Quixtus. "Here's half a sovereign."

Voicelessness and wonder provoked an inarticulate wheeze like the spitting of a cat. The man was still gaping at the unaccustomed coin in his hand when the cab drove off. But Quixtus had not been many minutes on his way when a thought smote him like a sledge-hammer. He brought his fist down furiously on the leathern seat.

"What a fool! What a monumental fool I've been!" he cried.

He had just realised that the devil had offered him as pretty a little chance of sheer wickedness as could be met with on a May morning, which he had not taken. Instead of giving the man ten shillings, he ought to have laughed in his face, taunted him with his emaciation and driven off without paying the half-crown he had promised. To have let the very first opportunity slip through his fingers! He would have to wear a badge like that of the gentle Duke Guarnieri to keep his wits from wandering.

When he reached home he looked for a moment into the little room at the head of the kitchen stairs. The Blissful One still slept, a happy smile on her face, and the paper pinned to her apron.

There was surely some chance of wickedness here. Quixtus *furens* scratched an inventive head. Suppose he carried her outside and set her on the doorstep. He regarded her critically. She was buxom—about twelve stone. He was a spare and unathletic man. A great yawn interrupted his speculations, and turning off the light he stumbled off sleepily and wearily to bed.

CHAPTER VI

THE Blissful One carried out her master's written injunction. He did not see her face again. She packed up her trunks the next morning and silently stole away with a racking headache and a set of gold teaspoons which she took in lieu of a month's wages. The vague female awakened Quixtus and prepared his breakfast. When he asked her whether she could cook lunch, she grew pale but said that she would try. She went to the nearest butcher, bought a fibrous organic substance which he asserted to be prime rump-steak, and coming back did something desperate with it in a frying pan. After the first disastrous mouthful, Quixtus rose from the table.

"I give it to you for yourself, my good woman," said he, priding himself on his murderous intent. "I'll get lunch elsewhere."

He went to his club, for the first time for many days. And this marked his reappearance in the great world.

He was halfway through his meal when a man, passing down the room from pay-desk to door, caught sight of him and approached with extended hand.

"My dear Quixtus. How good it is to see you again."

He was a bald, pink-faced little man, wearing great round gold spectacles that seemed to be fitted on to his smiles. Kindliness and the gladness of life emanated from him, as perfume does from a jar of attar of

roses. His name was Wonnacott, and he was a member of the council of the Anthropological Society. Quixtus, who had known him for years, scanned his glad cherubic face, and set him down as a false-hearted scoundrel. With this mental reservation he greeted him cordially enough.

"We want you badly," said Wonnacott. "Things aren't all they should be at the Society."

"The monkey's tail peeping out between their coat tails?" Quixtus asked eagerly.

"No. No. It's only Griffiths." Griffiths was the Vice-President. "He knows his subject as well as anybody, but he's a perfect fool in the chair. We want you back."

"Very good of you to say so," replied Quixtus, "but I'm thinking of resigning from the Society altogether, giving up the study of anthropology and presenting my collection to a criminal lunatic asylum."

Wonnacott, laughing, drew a chair from the vacant table next to Quixtus's and sat down.

"Why—— What?"

"We know how Primitive Man in most of the epochs slew his enemies, cooked his food, and adorned or disfigured his person; but of the subtle workings of his malignant mind we are hopelessly ignorant."

"I don't suppose his mind was more essentially malignant than yours or mine," said Wonnacott.

"Quite so," Quixtus agreed. "But we can study the malignancy, the brutality and bestiality of the minds of us living people. We are books open for each other to read. Historic man too we can study—from documents—Nero, Alexander the Sixth, Titus Oates, Sweeny Tod the Barber——"

"But, my dear man," smiled Wonnacott, "you are getting into the province of criminology."

"It's the only science worth studying," said Quix-

tus. Then, after a pause, during which the waiter put the Stilton in front of him and handed him the basket of biscuits, "Do you ever go to race meetings?"

"Sometimes—Yes," laughed the other, startled at the unexpectedness of the question. "I have my little weaknesses like other people."

"There must be a great deal of wickedness to be found on race-courses."

"Possibly," replied Wonnacott, apologetically, "but I've never seen any myself."

Quixtus musingly buttered a piece of biscuit. "That's a pity. A great pity. I was thinking of going on the turf. I was told that nowhere else could such depravity be found."

One or two of Wonnacott's smiles dropped, as it were, from his face and he looked keenly at Quixtus. He saw a hard glitter in the once mild, china-blue eyes, and an unnatural hardness in the setting of the once kindly lips. There was a curious new eagerness on a face that had always been distinguished by a gentle repose. The hands, too, that manipulated the knife and biscuits, shook feverishly.

"I'm afraid you're not very well, my dear fellow," said he.

"Not well?" Quixtus laughed, somewhat harshly. "Why I feel ten times younger than I did this time yesterday. I've never been so well in my life. Why, I could——" he stopped short and regarded Wonnacott suspiciously—— "No. I won't tell you what I could do."

He drank the remainder of his glass of white wine, and threw his napkin on the table.

"Let us go and smoke," said he.

In the smoking-room, Wonnacott, still observing him narrowly, asked him why he was so interested in

the depravity of the turf. Quixtus met his eyes with the same suspicious glance.

"I told you I was going to take up the study of criminology. It's a useful and fascinating science. But as the subject does not seem to interest you," he added with a quick return to his courteous manner, "let us drop it. You mustn't suppose I've lost all interest in the Society. What especially have you to complain of about Griffiths?"

Wonnacott explained, and for the comfortable half-hour of coffee and cigarettes after lunch they discussed the ineffectuality of Griffiths and, as all good men will, exchanged views on the little foibles of their colleagues on the Council of the Anthropological Society. Quixtus discoursed so humanly, that Wonnacott, on his way office-wards, having lit a cigar at the spirit-lamp in the club-vestibule, looked at the burning end meditatively and said to himself:

"I must have been mistaken after all."

But Quixtus remained for some time in the club deep in thought, scanning a newspaper with unseeing eyes. He had been injudicious in his conversation with Wonnacott. He had almost betrayed his secret. It behooved him to walk warily. In these days the successful serpent has to assume not only the voice, but the outer semblance and innocent manners of the dove. If he went crawling and hissing about the world, proclaiming his venomousness aloud like a rattle-snake, humanity would either avoid him altogether, or hit him over the head out of self-protection. He must ingratiate himself once more with mankind, and only strike when opportunity offered. For that reason he would simulate a continued interest in Prehistoric Man.

On the other hand, the newly born idea of the study of criminology hovered agreeably and comfortingly

over his mind. So much so, that he presently left the club, and, walking to a foreign library, ordered the works of Cesare Lombroso, Ottolenghi, Ferri, Topinard, Corre and as many other authorities on criminology as he could think of, and then, having ransacked the second-hand bookshops in Charing Cross Road, drove home exultant with an excellent set of "The Newgate Calendar."

Thus he entered upon a new phase of life. He began to mingle again with his fellows, hateful and treacherous dogs though they were. He was no longer morose and solitary. At the next meeting of the Anthropological Society he occupied the Presidential Chair, amid a chorus of (hypocritical) welcome. He accepted invitations to dinner. Also, finding intense discomfort in the ministrations of the vague female, and realising that after making good all Marrable's defalcations, he was still the possessor of a large fortune, he procured the services of a cook and reinstated his former manservant—luckily disengaged—in office, and again inhabited the commodious apartments which he had abandoned. In fact, he not only resumed his former mode of life, but exceeded it on the social side, walking more abroad into the busy ways of men. In all of which he showed wisdom. For it is manifestly impossible for a man to pursue a successful career of villainy if he locks himself up in the impregnable recesses of a gloomy house and meets no mortal on whom to practise.

One afternoon, after deep and dark excogitation, he proceeded to Romney Place and called upon Tommy Burgrave, whom he had not seen since the day of the trial. Tommy, just recovering from the attack of congestion of the lungs, which had prevented him from attending his great-uncle's funeral, was sitting in his dressing-gown before the bedroom fire, while

Clementina, unkempt as usual, was superintending his consumption of a fried sole.

Tommy greeted him boyishly. He couldn't rise, as his lap was full of trays and fat things. His uncle would find a chair somewhere in the corner. It was jolly of him to come.

"You might have come sooner," snapped Clementina. "The boy has been half dead. If it hadn't been for me, he would have been quite dead."

"You nursed him through his illness?"

"What else do you suppose I meant?"

"He could have had a trained nurse," said Quixtus. "There are such things."

"Trained nurses!" cried Clementina, in disdain. "I've no patience with them. If they're ugly, they're brutes—because they know that a good-looking boy like Tommy won't look at them. If they're pretty, they're fools, because they're always hoping that he will."

"I say, Clementina," Tommy protested. "Nurses are the dearest people in the world. A fellow crocked up is just a 'case' for them, and they never think of anything but pulling him through. 'Tisn't fair of you to talk like that."

"Isn't it?" said Clementina, conscious of a greater gap than usual in the back of her blouse, and struggling with one hand to reconcile button and hole. "What on earth do you know about it? Just tell me, are you a woman or am I?"

Tommy laid down his fork with a sigh. "You're an angel, Clementina, and this sole was delicious; and I wish there were more of it."

She took the tray from his knees and put it on a side table. Tommy turned to Quixtus who sat Sphinx-like on a straight-back chair, and expressed his regret

at not having been able to attend his great-uncle's funeral.

"You missed an interesting ceremony," said Quixtus.

Tommy laughed. "I suppose the old man didn't leave me anything?"

He had heard nothing privately about the will, and, as probate had not yet been taken out, the usual summary had not been published in the newspapers.

"I'm afraid not," said Quixtus. "Did you expect anything?"

"Oh Lord, no!" laughed Tommy, honestly.

"Then more fool you, and more horrid old man he," said Clementina.

There was a pause. Quixtus, not feeling called upon to defend his defunct and mocking kinsman, said nothing. Clementina drew the crumpled yellow packet of Maryland tobacco and papers from a pocket in her skirt (she insisted on having pockets in her skirts) and rolled a cigarette. When she had licked it, she turned to Quixtus.

"I suppose you know that I came like a fool to your house and was refused admittance."

"Well trained servants," said Quixtus, "have a knack of indiscriminate obedience."

"You might have said something more civil," she said, taken aback.

"If you will dictate to me a formula of politeness I will repeat it with very great pleasure," he retorted. "Put a little honey on my tongue and it will wag as mellifluously as that of any hypocrite who wins for himself the adulation of mankind."

"Mercy's sake man!" exclaimed Clementina, in her astonishment allowing the smoke to mingle with her words. "Where on earth did you learn to talk like that?"

Their eyes met, and Clementina suddenly screwed up her face and looked at him. She saw in those blue eyes something, she could not tell what, but something which had not been in the eyes of the gentle, sweet-souled man she had painted. Her grimace, although familiar through the sittings, somewhat disconcerted him. She made the grim sound that with her represented laughter.

"I was only wondering whether I had got you right after all."

"Of course, you got him right," cried Tommy the ingenuous. "It's one of the rippingest pieces of work you've ever done."

"The Anthropological Society find it quite satisfactory," said Quixtus stiffly.

"Flattered, I'm sure," said Clementina.

Tommy, dimly aware now of antagonism, diplomatically introduced a fresh topic of conversation.

"You haven't told him, Clementina," said he, "of the letter you got the other day from Shanghai."

"Shanghai?" echoed Quixtus.

"Yes, from Will Hammersley," said Clementina, her voice softening. "He's in very bad health, and hopes to come home within a year. I thought you, too, might have heard from him."

Quixtus shook his head. For a moment he could not trust himself to speak. The sudden mention of that detested name stunned him like a blow. At last he said: "I never realised you were such friends."

"He used to come to me in my troubles."

Quixtus passed his hand between neck and collar, as if to free his throat from clutching fingers. His voice, when he spoke, sounded hoarse and far away in his ears.

"You were in his confidence, I suppose."

"I think so," said Clementina, simply.

To the sorely afflicted man's unbalanced and suspicious mind this was a confession of complicity in the wrong he had suffered. He controlled himself with a great effort, and turned his face away so that she should not see the hate and anger in his eyes. She, too, had worked against him. She, too, had mocked him as the poor blind fool. She, too, he swore within himself, should suffer in the general devastation he would work upon mankind. As in a dream he heard her summarise the letter which she had received. Hammersley had of late been a victim to the low Eastern fever. Once he had nearly died, but had recovered. It had taken hold, however, of his system and nothing but home would cure him. In Shanghai he had made fortune enough to retire. Once in England again he would never leave it as long as he lived.

"He writes one or two pages of description of what May must be in England—the fresh sweet green of the country lanes, the cool lawns, the old grey churches peeping through the trees, the restful, undulating country, the smell of the hawthorn and blackthorn at dawn and eve—those are his words—the poor man's so sick for home that he has turned into a twopenny ha-penny poet——"

"I think it's damned pathetic," said Tommy. "Don't you, Uncle Ephraim?"

"I beg your pardon," said Quixtus with a start.

"Don't you think it's pathetic for a chap stranded sick in a God-forsaken place in China, to write that high falutin' stuff about England? Clementina read it to me. It's the sort of thing a girl of fifteen might have written as a school essay—all the obvious things you know—and it meant such a devil of a lot to him—everything on earth. It fairly made me choke. I call it damned pathetic."

Quixtus said in a dry voice, "Yes, it's pathetic—it's comic—it's tragic—it's melodramatic—it's nostalgic—it's climatic—— Yes," he added, absently, "it's climatic."

"I wonder you don't say it's dyspeptic and psychic and fantastic," said Clementina, snatching an old hat from the bed. "Do you know you've talked nothing but rubbish ever since you entered this room?"

"Language, my dear Clementina," he quoted, "was given to us to conceal our thoughts."

"Bah!" said Clementina. She held out her hand abruptly. "Good-bye. I'll run in later, Tommy, and see how you're getting on."

Quixtus opened the door for her to pass out and returned to his straight-backed chair. Tommy handed him a box of cigarettes.

"Won't you smoke? I tried one cigarette to-day for the first time, but the beastly thing tasted horrid—just as if I were smoking oatmeal."

Quixtus declined the cigarette. He remained silent, looking gloomily at the young, eager face which masked heaven knows what faithlessness and guile. Being in league with Clementina, whom he knew now was his enemy, Tommy was his enemy too. And yet, for the life of him, he could not carry out the malignant object of his visit. For some time Tommy directed the conversation. He upbraided the treacherous English climate which had enticed him out of doors, and then stretched him on a bed of sickness. It was rough luck. Just as he was beginning to find himself as a landscape painter. It was a beautiful little bit of river—all pale golden lights and silver greys—now that May was beginning and all the trees in early leaf he could not get that spring effect again—could not, in fact, finish the picture. By the way, his uncle had not heard the news. The little picture

that had got (by a mistake, according to Clementina) into a corner of the New Gallery, had just been sold. Twenty-five guineas. Wasn't it ripping? A man called Smythe, whom he had never heard of, had bought it.

"You see, it wasn't as if some one I knew had bought it, so as to give a chap some encouragement," he remarked naïvely. "It was a stranger who had the whole show to pick from, and just jumped at my landscape."

Quixtus, who had filled up by monosyllables the various pauses in Tommy's discourse, at last rose to take his leave. He had tried now and then to say what he had come to say; but his tongue had grown thick and the roof of his mouth dry, and his words literally stuck in his throat.

"It's awfully good of you, Uncle Ephraim," said Tommy, "to have come to see me. As soon as I get about again, I'll try to do something jolly for you. There's a bit of wall in your drawing-room that's just dying for a picture. And I say"—he twisted his boyish face whimsically and looked at him with a twinkle in his dark blue eyes—"I don't know how in the world it has happened—but if you *could* let me draw my allowance now instead of the first of the month——"

This was the monthly euphemism. Against his will Quixtus made the customary reply.

"I'll send you a cheque as usual."

"You *are* a good sort," said Tommy. "And one of these days I'll get there and you won't be ashamed of me."

But Quixtus went away deeply ashamed of himself, disgusted with his weakness. He had started out with the fixed and diabolical intention of telling the lad that he was about to disinherit him.

He had schemed this exquisite cruelty in the coolness of solitude. In its craft and subtlety it appeared peculiarly perfect. He had come fully prepared to perform the deed of wickedness. Not only had Clementina's gentle presence not caused him to waver in his design, but his discovery of her complicity in his great betrayal had inflamed his desire for vengeance. Yet when the time came for the wreaking thereof, his valour was of the oozing nature lamented by Bob Acres. He was shocked at his pusillanimity. In the middle of Sloane Square he stopped and cursed himself, and was nearly run over by a taxi-cab. As it was empty he hailed it, and continued his maledictions in the security of its interior.

Manifestly there was something wrong in his psychological economy which no reading of Lombroso or the Newgate Calendar could remedy. Or was he merely suffering from a lack of experience in evil doing? Did he not need a guide in the Whole Art and Practice of Wickedness?

He walked up and down his museum in anxious thought. At last a smile lit up his gaunt features. He sat down and wrote notes of invitation to Huckaby, Vandermeer, and Billiter to dinner on the following Tuesday.

CHAPTER VII

QUIXTUS received them in the museum, a long room mainly furnished with specimen cases whose glass tops formed a double inclined plane, diagrams of geological formations, and book-cases full of palæontological literature—a cold, inhuman, inhospitable place. The three looked more dilapidated than ever. Huckaby's straggling whiskers had grown deeper into his cheek; Vandermeer's face had become foxier, Billiter's more pallid and puffy. No overcoats hung on the accustomed pegs, for the cessation of the eleemosynary deposits had led, among other misfortunes, to the pawning of these once indispensable articles of attire. The three wore, therefore, the dismally apologetic appearance of the man who had no wedding garment. The only one of them who put on a simulated heartiness of address was Billiter. He thrust out a shaky hand—

"My dear Quixtus, how delightful——"

But the sight of his host's unwelcoming face chilled his enthusiasm. Quixtus bowed slightly and motioned them, with his grave courtesy, to comfortless seats. He commanded the situation. So might a scholar prince of the school of Macchiavelli have received his chief poisoner, strangler, and confidential abductor. They went down to dinner. It was not an hilarious meal. The conversation which used to flow now fell in spattering drops amid a dead silence.

"It's a fine day," said Quixtus.

"Very," said Huckaby.

"Finer than yesterday," said Vandermeer.

"It promises well for to-morrow," said Billiter.

"It always breaks its promise," said Quixtus.

"H'm," said Huckaby.

They made up for the lacking feast of reason by material voracity. A microscopic uplifting of Spriggs the butler's eyebrows betokened wonder at their Gargantuan helpings. Vandermeer, sitting at the foot of the table opposite to Quixtus, bent his foxy face downwards till the circumference of the plate became the horizon of his universe. Billiter ate with stolid cynicism; Huckaby, with a faint air of bravado. Once he said:

"I'm afraid Quixtus we got a bit merry the last time."

"It's to the memory of that," replied Quixtus, "that I owe the pleasure of your company to-night."

"I'm beastly sorry——" began Billiter.

"Pray don't mention it," Quixtus interrupted blandly. "I hope the quails are to your liking."

"Fine," said Vandermeer, without raising his eyes from his plate.

Once more reigned the spell of silence which oppressed even the three outcast men; but Quixtus, hardened by his fixed idea, felt curiously at his ease. He sat in his chair with the same sense of security and confidence as he had done before delivering his Presidential Address at the meeting of the Anthropological Society, while the secretary went through the preliminary formal business. The preliminary business here was the meal. As soon, however, as the port had been sent round and Spriggs had retired, Quixtus addressed his guests.

"Gentlemen," said he, and met in turns the three pairs of questioning eyes. "You may wonder perhaps why I have invited you to dinner to-night, and why,

you being thus invited, the meal has not been warmed by its accustomed glow of geniality. It is my duty and my pleasure now to tell you. Hitherto at these dinners we have—let us say—worn the comic mask. Beneath its rosy and smiling exterior we have dissimulated our own individual sentiments. We have been actors, without realising it, in an oft-repeated comedy. Only on the occasion of our last meeting did we put aside the mask and show to each other what we were."

"I've already apologised," murmured Billiter.

"My dear fellow," said Quixtus, raising his long thin hand, "that's the last thing I want you to do. In this world of fraud and deceit no man ought to regret having bared his soul honestly to the world. Now, gentlemen, I have not asked you here to insult you at my own table. I have gathered you around me because I need your counsel and your services for which I hope adequately to remunerate you."

A quiver of animation passed over the three faces. "Remunerate" was a magic word; the master-word of an incantation. It meant money, and money meant food and drink—especially alcoholic drink.

"I know I am speaking for my two friends," said Huckaby, "when I say that our hearts are always at your service."

"The heart," replied Quixtus, "is a physiological organ and a sentimental delusion. There are no hearts in that sense. You know as well as I do, my dear fellow, that there are no such things as love, affection, honour, loyalty in the world. Self-interest and self-indulgence are the guiding principles of conduct. Governed by a morbid and futile tradition, we refuse to regard the world in the malevolent light of day, but see it artificially through the hypocritical coloured glasses of benevolence."

Huckaby and Vandermeer, who retained the rudi-

ments of an intellect, looked at their once simple-minded and tender-hearted host in blank bewilderment. They hardly knew whether to wince under a highly-educated gentleman's cutting irony, or to accept these remarkable propositions as honest statements of opinion. But the ironical note was not perceptible. Quixtus spoke in the same gentle tone of assurance as he would have used when entering on a dissertation upon the dolichocephalic skulls in his collection which had been found in a long barrow in Yorkshire. He was the master of a subject laying down incontrovertible facts. So Huckaby and Vandermeer, marvelling greatly, stared at him out of speculative eyes. Billiter, before whom the incautious decanter of port had halted, lost the drift of his host's philosophic utterances.

"The time has now come," continued Quixtus, relighting (unsophisticated soul!) the cigar which he had allowed to go out—"the time has now come for us four to be honest with one another. Up to a recent date I was a slave to this optical delusion of tradition. But things have happened to clear my eyes, and to make me frankly confess myself no better than yourselves—an entirely unscrupulous man."

"Pray remember that I'm a sometime Fellow——" began Huckaby.

"I'm a gentleman of good family——" began Billiter, who had understood the last sentence.

"Yes. Yes," replied Quixtus, interrupting them. "I know. That's why your assistance will be valuable. I need the counsels of men of breeding and education. I find from my reading that the vulgar criminal would be useless for my purpose. Now, you all have trusted men who have failed you. So have I. You have felt the cowardly blows of Fortune. So have I. You have no vestige of faith in your fellow

man—you even believed me to be a party to my late partner's frauds—you can have, I say, no faith left in humanity. Neither have I. You are Ishmaels, your hand against every man. So am I. You would like to be revenged upon your fellow creatures. So would I. You have passed your lives in pursuing evil rather than good. You, in a word, are entirely unscrupulous. If you will acknowledge this we can proceed to business. If not, we will part finally as soon as this agreeable evening is at an end. Gentlemen, what do you say?"

Billiter, looking upon the wine while it was red—there was not much left to show the colour—laughed wheezily and shortly.

"I suppose we're wrong 'uns," said he. "At least I am. I own up."

Vandermeer said bitterly: "When a man is hunted by poverty he can't run straight, for at the end of the straight path is death."

"And you, Huckaby?"

"I also have bolted into a drain or two in my time."

"Good," said Quixtus. "Now we understand one another."

"You may understand us," said Huckaby, tugging at his untidy beard, "but I'm hanged, drawn, and quartered if we understand you."

"I thought I had made myself particularly clear," said Quixtus.

"For my part," said Billiter, "I can't make out what you're getting at except to make us confess that we're wrong 'uns."

"Dear, dear," said Quixtus.

"I can't understand it," said Vandermeer, looking intently at him across the table out of his little sharp eyes. "I can't understand it, unless it is that you

have some big scoop on and want us to come into it, so as to do the dirty work. If that's so I'm on, so long as it's safe. But I've steered clear of the law up to now and have no desire to run the risk of penal servitude."

"Oh Lord no!" cried Billiter with a shiver.

Quixtus pressed the burning stump of his cigar against his plate and looked up with a smile.

"Please make your minds easy on that score. I have been reading criminology lately with considerable interest, and I have gone through a volume or two of the Newgate Calendar, and the result of my reading is the conviction that crime is folly. It is a disease. It is also vulgar. No, I have no desire to increase my personal possessions in any way; neither do I contemplate the commission of acts of violence against the person or the destruction of property. Anything therefore that comes within the category of crime may be dismissed from our consideration."

"Then in the name of Gehenna," exclaimed Huckaby, "what is it that you want us to do?"

"It is very simple," said Quixtus. "I may plot out an attractive scheme of wickedness, but the circumstances of my early training have left me without the power to execute it. I should like to call on any one of you for guidance, perhaps practical assistance. I may want to see and hear of wickedness going on around me. I would count on you to gratify my curiosity. Lastly, not having an inventive mind, it being rather analytic than synthetic, I should welcome any suggestions that you might bring me."

"It's a rum go," said Billiter, "but I'm on, so long as there's money in it."

"There will be money in it," said Quixtus.

"Then I'm on, too," said Vandermeer.

"You will find us, my dear Quixtus," said Huck-

aby, "your very devoted Familiars—your Oliviers le Daim, your Eminences Grises, your *âmes damnées*. We'll be your ministering evil spirits, your genii from Eblis. It's a new occupation for a Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, but it's not unalluring. And now, as Billiter has finished the decanter, may I take the liberty of asking for another bottle, so that Vandermeer and I can drink to the health of our chief."

"With all the pleasure in life," said Quixtus.

As soon as the three newly constituted Evil Genii were out of earshot of the house, they stopped on the pavement with one accord and burst into unseemly laughter.

"Did you ever hear anything like it?" cried Billiter.

"He's as mad as Bedlam," said Vandermeer.

"A sort of inverted Knight of the Round Table," said Huckaby. "He yearns to ride abroad committing human wrongs."

"Are we to call for orders every day like the butcher, the baker, and the greengrocer?" said Vandermeer.

"He was so sane at first," said Vandermeer, "that I really thought he had some definite scoop in view. But it all turns out to be utter moonshine."

"If he doesn't want to thieve or murder or paint the town red," said Billiter, "what the blazes in the way of wickedness is left for him to do?"

"It's moonshine," repeated Vandermeer.

"If it wasn't," said Huckaby, "none of us would touch it. We can't take the matter seriously. We're just lending ourselves to a farce, that's all."

"Naturally," Billiter agreed. "We must humour him."

They walked on slowly, discussing the unprecedented situation. They were unanimous in the opinion that the poor gentleman had gone distraught. They had all noticed signs of his affliction on the last occasion of their dining at his table. If he had been in his right senses then, he would surely not have behaved with such discourtesy. They agreed to forgive him for turning them out of doors.

"It's lucky for him," said Huckaby, "that he has three old friends like ourselves. He might have got into other hands, and then—God help him. My only reason for falling in with his mood was in order to protect him from himself—and from sharks and blood suckers."

Billiter and Vandermeer declared that they, too, had acted only out of a sense of loyalty to their old and distracted friend. They protested so hard that their tongues clave to the roofs of their mouths, and each acknowledged his thirst. They turned into the bar-parlour of the first public-house, where they called for whisky, and, each man having found a hat as good a substitute for the sacks of Joseph's brethren as an overcoat, they continued to call for whisky, and to drink it until the tavern closed for the night. By that time they glowed with conscious virtue. Huckaby swore that he would permit no ruddy lobsters to dig their claws into Quixtus's sacred person.

"Here's poor dear old chap's health, drunk in very last drop," cried Billiter, enthusiastically draining his last glass.

The tragedy of Quixtus's loss of reason reduced Vandermeer to tears. He was sorrowful in his cups. He, Vandermeer, had no one to love him; but Quixtus should never find himself in that desolate predicament, as he, Vandermeer, would love him like a friend, a brother, like a silver-haired maiden aunt.

"I've had a silver-haired maiden aunt myself," he wailed.

While Billiter comforted him, Huckaby again warned them against ruddy lobsters. If they would swear to join him in a league to defend their patron and benefactor, he would accept their comradeship. If they preferred to be ruddy lobsters, he would wash his hands of them. They repudiated the crustacean suggestion. They were more Quixtus's friends than he. A quarrel nearly broke out, each claiming to be the most loyal and disinterested friend Quixtus ever had in his life. Finally they were reconciled and wrung each other warmly by the hand. The barman called closing time and pushed them gently into the street. They staggered deviously to their several garrets and went to bed, each certain that he had convinced the two others of his beauty and nobility of soul.

Vandermeer was the first of the Evil Genii to be summoned. Quixtus laid before him the case of Tommy and the failure of his diabolical project. Vandermeer listened attentively. There was method after all in his patron's madness. He wished to do some hurt to his nephew for the sheer sake of evil-doing. As far as the intention went he was seriously trying to carry out his malevolent principles. It was not all moonshine. Vandermeer thought quickly. He was the craftiest of the three, and that perhaps was why Quixtus had instinctively chosen him for the first adventure. He saw profit in humouring the misanthrope, though he smiled inwardly at the simplicity of his idea.

"There's nothing particularly diabolical in telling a young fellow with a brilliant career before him that you're going to cut him out of your will."

"Isn't there?" said Quixtus, with an air of

disappointment. "What then would you suggest?"

"First," answered Vandermeer, "what do you think would be a fair price for a suggestion?" He regarded him with greedy eyes. "Would twenty pounds be out of the way?"

"I'll give you twenty pounds," said Quixtus.

Vandermeer drew in his breath quickly, as a man does who wins a bet at long odds.

"There are all sorts of things you can do. The obvious one would be to stop his allowance. But I take it you want something more artistic and subtle. Wait—let me think—" He covered his eyes with his hand for a moment. "Look. How will this do? It strikes me as infernally wicked. You say he is devoted to his art. Well, make him give it up——"

"Excellent! Excellent!" cried Quixtus. "But how?"

"Can you get him into any business office in the City?"

"Yes. My friend Griffiths of the Anthropological Society is secretary of the Star Assurance Coy. A word from me would get the boy into the office."

"Good. Then tell him that unless he accepts this position within a month and promises never to touch a paint-brush again, he will not receive a penny from you either during your lifetime or after your death. In this way you will bring him up against an infernal temptation, and whichever way he decides he'll be wretched. I call that a pretty scheme."

"It's an inspiration of genius," exclaimed Quixtus excitedly. "I'll write the cheque now." He sat down to his desk and pulled out his cheque-book. "And you will go at once to my nephew—I'll give you a card of introduction—and acquaint him with my decision."

"What?" cried Vandermeer.

Quixtus calmly repeated the last sentence. Vandermeer's face went a shade paler. He wrung his hands, which were naturally damp, until they grew as bloodless as putty. He had never done any wanton harm in his life. All the meanness and sharp-dealing he had practised were but a poor devil's shifts to fill an empty belly. Quixtus's behest covered him with dismay. It was unexpected. It is one thing to suggest to a crazy and unpractical patron a theoretical fantasia of wickedness, and another to be commanded to put it oneself into execution. It was less moonshine than ever.

"Don't you want to do it?" asked Quixtus, unwittingly balancing temptation, in the form of a fat cheque-book, in his hand.

Vandermeer fell. What wolf-eyed son of Hagar would have resisted?

"I think," said he, with a catch in his throat, "that if the suggestion alone is worth twenty pounds, the carrying out of it is worth—say—ten more."

"Very well," said Quixtus; "but," he added drily, "the next time I hope you'll give an estimate to cover the whole operation."

The second of the three to receive a summons from the Master was Billiter.

"You know something about horse-racing," remarked Quixtus.

"What I don't isn't worth knowing. I've chucked away a fortune in acquiring the knowledge."

"I want you to accompany me to race-meetings and show me the wickedness of the turf," said Quixtus.

"So that's my little job, is it?"

"That's your little job."

"I think I can give you a run for your money," remarked Billiter, a pale sunshine of intelligence overspreading his puffy features. "But—" he paused.

"But what?"

"I can't go racing with you in this kit."

"I will provide you," said Quixtus, "with whatever costume you think necessary for the purpose."

Billiter went his way exulting and spent the remainder of the afternoon in tracking a man down from his office in Soho, his house in Peckham, several taverns on the Surrey side of the river, to a quiet café in Regent Street. The man was a red-faced, thick-necked, hard, fishy-eyed villain with a mouth like the slit of a letter-box, and went by the name (which he wore inscribed on his hat at race-meetings) of Old Joe Jenks. Billiter drew him into a corner and whispered gleeful tidings into his ear. After which Old Joe Jenks drew Billiter to a table and filled him up with the most seductive drinks the café could provide.

Before the lessons in horse-racing under Billiter's auspices began—for gorgeous raiment, appropriate to Sandown and Kempton, like Rome, is not built in a day—Quixtus sent for the remaining Evil Genius.

"What have you to suggest?" he asked after some preliminary and explanatory conversation.

A humorous twinkle came into Huckaby's eye, and a smile played round his lips beneath the straggling brushwood of hair.

"I have a great idea," he said.

"What is it?"

"Break a woman's heart," said Huckaby.

Quixtus reflected gravely. It would indeed be a charming, enticing piece of wickedness.

"I shouldn't have to marry her?" he asked in some concern.

"Heaven forbid."

"I like it," said Quixtus, leaning back in his chair and smoothing his scrappy moustache with his lean fingers. "I like it very much. The only difficulty is: where can I find the woman whose heart I can break?"

"Take a tour abroad," said Huckaby. "On the Continent of Europe there are thousands of English women only waiting to have their hearts broken."

"That may be true," said Quixtus; "but how shall I obtain the necessary introductions?"

"I," cried Huckaby, raising a bony hand that protruded through a very frayed and dirty shirt-cuff. "I, Eustace Huckaby, will reassume my air of academical distinction and will accompany you into the *pays du tendre* and introduce you to any woman you like. In other words, my dear Quixtus, although I may not look like a Lothario at the present moment, I have had considerable experience in amatory adventures—and I'm sure you would find my assistance valuable."

Quixtus reflected again. Aware of his limitations, he recognised the futility of going alone on a heart-breaking expedition among strange even though expectant females. But would Huckaby be an ideal companion? Huckaby was self-assertive, not to say impudent, in manner; and Huckaby had certain shocking habits. On the other hand, perhaps the impudence was the very quality needed in the quest; and as for the habits— He decided.

"Very well. I accept your proposal—on one condition. What that is you doubtless can guess."

"I can," said Huckaby. "I give you my word of honour that you will never see me otherwise than sober."

An undertaking which would not preclude him from taking a bottle of whisky to bed whenever he felt so inclined.

"We had better start at once," said Huckaby, after some necessary discussion of the question of wardrobe.

"I must wait," replied Quixtus, "until I've attended some race-meetings with Billiter."

Huckaby frowned. He was not aware that to

Billiter had already been assigned a sphere of action.

"I don't want to say anything unfriendly. But if I were you I shouldn't trust Billiter too implicitly. He's a—" he paused—being sober and serious, he rejected the scarlet epithet which, when used in allusion to his friends, had given colour to his gayer speech—"He's a man who knows too much of the game."

"My dear Huckaby," said Quixtus. "I shall never trust another human being as long as I live."

That evening, somewhat wondering that he had heard no news of Tommy or of Vandermeer, he unlocked the iron safe in his museum and took out his will. He lit a candle and set it by the hearth. Now was the time to destroy the benevolent document. He put it near the flame; then drew it back. A new thought occurred to him. To practise on his nephew the same trick as his uncle had played upon him was mere unintelligent plagiarism. He felt a sudden disdain for the merely mimetic in wickedness.

"I will be original," said he. "Yes, original." He repeated the word as a formula both of consolation and incentive, and, blowing out the candle, put the will back into the safe.

CHAPTER VIII

"LORD, have mercy upon us!" cried Clementina. The pious ejaculation was in the nature of a reply to Miss Etta Concannon, the fragile slip of a girl whose portrait she had painted and in whose cornflower-blue eyes she had caught the haunting fear. There was no fear, however, in the eyes to-day. They were bright, direct, and abnormally serious. She had just announced her intention of becoming a hospital nurse. Whereupon Clementina had cried: "Lord, have mercy upon us!"

Now it must be stated that Etta Concannon had bestowed on an embarrassed Clementina her young and ardent affection; secretly, during the sittings for the portrait which her father had commissioned Clementina to paint as a wedding present, and openly, when the sittings were ended and she called upon Clementina as a friend. In the first flush of this avowed adoration she would send shy little notes, asking whether she might come to the studio to tea. As she lived quite close by, the missives were despatched by hand. Clementina, disturbed in the midst of her painting, would tear a ragged corner from the first bit of paper her eyes fell upon—note-paper, brown-paper, cartridge-paper—once it was sand-paper—scribble "Yes" on it with a bit of charcoal and send it out to the waiting messenger. At last she was driven to desperation.

"My good child," she said, "can't you drop in to tea without putting me to this elaborate correspondence?"

Etta Concannon thought she could, and thenceforward came to tea unheralded, and, eventually such were her powers of seduction that she enticed Clementina to her own little den in her father's house in Cheyne Walk—a fairy den all water-colour and gossamer very much like herself, in which Clementina gave the impression of an ogress who had blundered in by mistake. It was on the visit that Clementina repudiated the name of Miss Wing. She hated and loathed it. On Etta's lips it suggested a prim, starched governess—the conventional French caricature of the English Old Maid with long teeth and sharp elbows. She might be an old maid, but she wasn't a prim governess. Everybody called her Clementina. Upon which, to her professed discomfort, Etta threw her arms round her neck and kissed her and called her a darling. Why Clementina wasted her time over this chit of a girl she was at a loss to conjecture. She was about as much use in the world as a rainbow. Yet for some fool reason (her own expression) Clementina encouraged her, and felt less grim in her company. The odd part of their intercourse was that the one thing under heaven they did not talk about was the bullet-headed, bull-necked young man to whom Etta was engaged—not until one day when, in response to the following epistle, Clementina brusquely dismissed her sitter, skewered on a battered hat, and rushed round to Cheyne Walk.

"My Dearest, Dearest Clementina,—Do come to me. I am in abject misery. The very worst has happened. I would come to you, but I'm not fit to be seen. Your own unhappy

"Etta."

"My poor child," cried Clementina, as she entered the bower and beheld a very dim and watery fairy

sobbing on a couch. "Who has been doing this to you?"

"It's R-Raymond," said Etta, chokingly.

To her astonishment Clementina found herself sitting on the couch with her arms round the girl. Now and then she did the most idiotic things without knowing in the least why she did them. In this position she listened to Etta's heartrending story. It was much involved, here and there incoherent, told with singular disregard of chronological sequence. When properly pieced together and shorn of irrelevance, this is what it amounted to:

Certain doings of the bullet-headed young man, doings not at all creditable—mean and brutal doings, indeed—had reached the ears of Etta's father. Now Etta's father was a retired admiral, and Etta the beloved child of his old age. The report of Captain Hilyard's doings had wounded him in his weakest spot. In a fine fury he telephonically commanded the alleged wrongdoer to wait upon him without delay. Captain Hilyard obeyed. The scene of the interview was a private room in the service club to which Admiral Concannon belonged. Admiral Concannon went straight to the point—it is an uncomfortable characteristic of British admirals. The bullet-headed young man not being able to deny the charges brought against him, Admiral Concannon expressed himself in such terms as are only polished to their brightest perfection on the quarter-deck of a man-of-war. The young man showed resentment—amazing impudence, according to the Admiral—whereupon the Admiral consigned him to the devil and charged him never to let him (the Admiral) catch him (the bullet-headed young man) lifting his scoundrelly eyes again to an innocent young girl. Admiral Concannon came home and told his daughter as much of the tale of turpitude

as was meet for her ears. Captain Hilyard repaired forthwith in unrighteous wrath to his quarters and packed off Etta's letters, with a covering note in which he insinuated that he was not sorry to have seen the last of her amiable family. It had all happened that day.

Hence the tears.

"I thought you wrote me that the worst had happened," said Clementina.

"Well, hasn't it?"

"Good Lord!" cried Clementina. "It's the very best thing that ever happened to you in all your born days."

In the course of a week Clementina brought the sorrowing damsel round to her own way of thinking.

"Do you know," said Etta, "I used to be rather afraid of him."

"Any fool could see that," said Clementina.

"Did you guess?" This with wide-open cornflower eyes.

"Look at your portrait and you'll see," said Clementina, mindful of the avalanche of memories which the portrait of Tommy Burgrave's rough-and-ready criticism of the bullet-headed young man had started on its overwhelming career. "Have you ever looked at it?"

"Of course I have."

"To look at a thing and to see it," remarked Clementina, "are two entirely different propositions. For instance, you looked at that young man, but you didn't see him. Yet your soul saw him and was afraid. Your father, too—I can't understand what he was about when he consented to the engagement."

"Captain Hilyard's father and he were old messmates," said Etta.

"Old messmakers!" snapped Clementina. "And what made you accept him?"

Etta looked mournful. "I don't know."

"The next time you engage yourself to a young man, just be sure that you do know. I suppose this one said, 'Dilly, dilly, come and be killed,' and you went like the foolish little geese in the nursery rhyme."

"They were ducks, dear," laughed Etta, taking Clementina's grim face between her dainty hands. "Ducks like you."

Clementina suffered the caress with a wry mouth.

"I think you're getting better," she said. "And I'm jolly glad of it. To have one young idiot on my hands ill with congestion of the lungs and another ill with congestion of the heart—both at the same time—is more than I bargained for. I suppose you think I'm a sort of Sister of Charity. Why don't you do as your father tells you and go down to your Aunt What's-her-name in Somersetshire?"

Etta made a grimace. "Aunt Elmira would drive me crazy. You're much more wholesome for me. And as for father"—she tossed her pretty head—"he has to do what he's told."

So Etta remained in town, her convalescence synchronising with that of Tommy Burgrave. Clementina began to find time to breathe and to make up arrears of work. As soon as Tommy was able to take his walks abroad, and Etta to seek distraction in the society of her acquaintance, Clementina shut herself up in her studio, forbidding the young people to come near her, and for a week painted the livelong day. At last, one morning two piteous letters were smuggled almost simultaneously into the studio.

". . . I haven't seen you for months and months. Do let me come to dinner to-night. . . . TOMMY."

". . . Oh, darling, DO come to tea this afternoon. . . . . ETTA."

"I shall go and paint in the Sahara," cried Clementina. But she seized two dirty scraps of paper and scrawled on them:

"Lord, yes, child, come to dinner."

"Lord, yes, child, I'll come to tea."

And having folded them crookedly despatched them to her young friends.

It was during this visit of Clementina to the fairy bower in Cheyne Walk that Etta informed her of her intention of becoming a hospital nurse.

"Lord, have mercy upon us!" cried Clementina.

"I don't see why I shouldn't," said Etta.

"The idea is preposterous," replied Clementina. "What need have you to work for your living?"

"I want to do something useful in the world."

"You'll do much better by remaining ornamental," said Clementina. "It's only when a woman is as ugly as sin and as poor as charity that she need be useful; that's to say while she's unmarried. When she's married she has got as much as she can do to keep her husband and children in order. A girl like you with plenty of money and the devil's own prettiness has got to stay at home and fulfil her destiny."

Etta, sitting on the window seat, looked at the Thames, seen in patches of silver through the fresh greenery of the Embankment trees.

"I know what you're thinking of, dear," she said, with the indulgent solemnity of the Reverend Mother of a Convent, "but I shall never marry."

"Rubbish," said Clementina.

"I've made up my mind, quite made up my mind."

Clementina sighed. Youth is so solemn, so futile, so like the youth of all the generations that have passed away. The child was suffering from one of the

natural sequelæ of a ruptured engagement. Once maidens in her predicament gat them into nunneries and became nuns and that was the end of them. Whether they regretted their rash act or not, who can say? Nowadays they rush into philanthropic or political activity, contriving happy evenings for costermongers or unhappy afternoons for Cabinet Ministers. The impulse driving them to nunnery, Whitechapel, or Caxton Hall has always been merely a reaction of sex; and the duration of the period of reaction is proportionate to the degree of brokenness of the heart. As soon as the heart is mended, sex has her triumphant way again and leaps in response to the eternal foolishness that the maiden blushes to read in the eyes of a comely creature in trousers. This Clementina knew, as all those—and only those—whose youth is behind them know it; and so, when Etta with an air of cold finality said that she had made up her mind, Clementina sighed. It was so ludicrously pathetic. Etta's heart had not even been broken; it had not sustained the wee-est, tiniest fracture; it had been roughly handled; that was all. In a month's time she would no more yearn to become a hospital nurse than to follow the profession of a chimney-sweep. In a month's time she would be flirting with merry, whole-hearted outrageousness. In a month's time, if the True Prince came along, she might be in love. Really in love. What a wonderful gift to a man would be the love of this fragrant wisp of womanhood!

"I've quite made up my mind, dear," she repeated.

"Then there's nothing more to be said," replied Clementina.

A shade of disappointment spread over the girl's face, like a little cloud over a May morning. She jumped from the window-seat and slid to a stool by Clementina's chair.

"But there's lots to be said. Lots. It's a tremendously important decision in life."

"Tremendous," said Clementina.

"It means that I'll die an old maid."

"Like me," said Clementina.

"If I'm like you I won't care a bit!"

"Lord, save us," said Clementina.

The girl actually took it for granted that she enjoyed being an old maid.

"I'll have a little house in the country all covered with honeysuckle, and a pony-trap and a dog and a cat and you'll come and stay with me."

"I thought you were going to be a hospital nurse," said Clementina.

"So I am; but I'll live in the house when I'm off duty."

Clementina rolled a cigarette. Etta knelt bolt upright and offered a lighted match. Now when a lissom-figured girl kneels bolt upright, with a shapely head thrown ever so little back, and stretches out her arm, there are few things more adorable in this world of beauty. Clementina looked at her for full ten second with the eyes of a Moses on Mount Nebo—supposing (a bewildering hypothesis) that Moses had been an artist and a woman—and then, disregarding cigarette and lighted match, she laid her hands on the girl's shoulders and shook her gently so that she sank back on her heels, and the match went out.

"Oh, you dear, delightful, silly, silly child."

She rose abruptly and went to the mantelpiece and lit the cigarette for herself. Etta laughed in blushing confusion.

"But, darling, nurses do have times off now and then."

"I wasn't thinking about nurses at all," said Clementina.

"Then what were you thinking of?" asked Etta, still sitting on her heels and craning her head round.

"Never mind," said Clementina. "But what will you want an old frump like me in your house for?"

"To listen to my troubles," said the girl.

Clementina walked home through the soft May sunshine, a smile twinkling in her little beady eyes, and the corners of her lips twisted into an expression of deep melancholy. If she had been ten years younger there would have been no smile in her eyes. If she had been ten years older a corroborative smile would have played about her lips. But at thirty-five a woman in Clementina's plight often does not know whether to laugh or to cry, and if she is a woman with a sense of humour she does both at once. The eternal promise, the eternal message vibrated through the air. The woman of five-and-thirty heard it instinctively and rejected it intellectually. She hurried her pace and gripped her umbrella—Clementina always carried a great, untidy, bulging umbrella—as if to assure herself that it would rain to-morrow from leaden skies. But the day laughed at her, and the gardens which she passed flaunted lilac and laburnam and pink may and springtide and youth before her, and buttercups looked at her with a mocking air of innocence. Forget-me-nots in window-boxes leaned forward and whispered, "See how fresh and young we are." A very young plane tree looked impudently green; in its dainty fragility it suggested Etta.

"Drat the child," said Clementina, and she walked along, shutting her eyes to the immature impertinences of the spring. But outside the window of a fruiterer's in the Royal Hospital Road she stopped short, with a little inward gasp. A bunch of parrot-tulips—great riotous gold things splashed all over with their crimson hearts' blood, flared like the sunset flames of a tropical

summer. As a hungry tomtit flies straight to a shred of meat, she went in and bought them.

When she reached her house in Romney Place she peeped for the last (and the hundredth) time into the open mouth of the twisted white paper cornet.

"They'll make a nice bit of colour on the dinner-table for Tommy," she said to herself.

O Clementina! O Woman! What in the name of Astarte had the gold and crimson reprobates to do with Tommy?

She let herself in with her key, traversed her Sheraton drawing-room, and opening the door leading on to the studio gallery. Tommy was below, walking up and down like a young wild beast in a cage. His usually tidy hair was ruffled, as though frenzied fingers had disturbed its calm. Clementina called out:

"You asked if you could come to dinner. Six o'clock isn't dinner-time."

"I know," he cried up at her. "I've been here for an hour."

She went down the spiral staircase and confronted him.

"What have you been doing to your hair? It's like Ferdinand's in *The Tempest*. And"—noticing a new note of violence in the customary peaceful chaos of the studio, "why have you been kicking my cushions about?"

"My uncle has gone stick, stark, staring, raving, lunatic mad," said Tommy.

He turned on his heel and strode to the other end of the studio. Clementina threw the parrot-tulips on a chair and drew off her left-hand old cotton glove, which she cast on the tulips. Then for a while, during Tommy's retreat and approach, she gazed thoughtfully at the thumb-tip which protruded from the right-hand glove.

"I'm not at all surprised," she said, when Tommy joined her.

"How else can you account for it?" cried Tommy, flinging his arms wide.

"Account for what?"

"What he has done. Listen. A week ago he came to see me, as jolly as could be. You were there——"

"About as jolly as a slug," said Clementina.

"Anyway, he was all right. I told the dear old chap I had unaccountably exceeded my allowance—and he sent me a cheque next day, just as he always does. This afternoon a card is brought up to me—my uncle's card. Written on it in his handwriting: 'To introduce Mr. Theodore Vandermeer.'"

"What name?" asked Clementina, pricking her ears.

"Vandermeer."

"Go on."

"I tell the servant to show him in—and in comes a dilapidated devil looking like a mangy fox——"

"That's the man."

"Do you know him?"

"All right. Go on."

"——who squirms and wriggles and beats about the bush, and at last tells me that he is commissioned by my uncle to inform me that unless I give up painting and go into some infernal city office within a month he'll stop my allowance and cut me out of his will."

Clementina worked the thumb-tip through the hole in the right hand glove until the entire thumb was visible.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

Tommy waved his arms. "I must try to see my uncle and ask him what's the meaning of it. Of course, I've no claim on him—but he's a rich man and fond of me and all that—and, when my poor

mother died, he sort of adopted me and gave me to understand that I needn't worry. So I haven't worried. And when I took up with painting he encouraged me all he knew. It's damnable!" He paused, and strode three or four paces up the studio and three or four back, as though to work off the dangerous excess of damnability in the situation. "It isn't as if I were an idle waster going to the devil. I've worked jolly hard, haven't I? I've put my back into it, and I'm beginning to do something. Only last week I was telling him about the New Gallery picture—he seemed quite pleased—and now, without a minute's warning, he sends this foxy-faced jackal to tell me to go into an office. It's—it's—God knows what it isn't!"

"I believe," said Clementina, looking at her thumb, "that there are quite worthy young men in city offices."

"I would sooner go into a stoke-hole," cried Tommy. "Oh, it's phantasmagorical!"

He sat down on the platform of the throne and buried his head in his hands.

"Cheer up," said Clementina. "The world hasn't come to an end yet and we haven't had dinner."

She opened a door at the back of the studio that communicated with the kitchen regions and, calling out for Eliza, was answered by a distant voice.

"Go to the grocer's and fetch a bottle of champagne for dinner."

"Yes, ma'am," said the voice, coming nearer. "What kind of champagne?"

"I don't know," said Clementina. "But tell him to send the best bottle he has got."

"What a good sort you are," said Tommy.

Neither were alarmed by the prospective quality of this vaguely selected vintage. How holy is simplicity!

It enables men and woman to face and pass through terrors without recognising them.

Clementina took off her hat and right-hand glove, and rolled a cigarette. Tommy burst out again:

"Why didn't he send for me and tell me so himself? Why didn't he write? Why did he charter this seedy, ugly scoundrel? I asked the wretch. He said my uncle thought that such a delicate communication had better be made through a third party. But what's my uncle doing—associating with such riff-raff? Why didn't he choose a gentleman? This chap looks as if he'd murder you for tuppence."

The young are apt to exaggerate the defects of those who have not gained their esteem. As a matter of fact, acknowledged afterwards by Tommy, Vandermeer had accomplished his unpleasant mission with considerable tact and delicacy. Tommy was an upstanding, squarely built young Saxon, with a bright blue eye, and there was a steep flight of stairs leading down from his studio.

"Once I fed him on ham and beef round the corner," said Clementina.

"The devil you did," said Tommy.

Clementina related the episode and her subsequent conversation with Quixtus.

"I give it up," said Tommy. "I knew that my uncle was greatly upset by the trial—and I have been thinking that perhaps it has rather unhinged his mind—and that was why he took up with such a scarecrow. But he has apparently been a friend of his for years. It shows you how little we know of our fellow creatures," he moralised. "If there ever was a chap I thought I knew inside out it was my Uncle Ephraim." Then pity smote him. "If he's really off his head, it's tragic. He was the best and dearest and kindest-hearted fellow in the world."

"Did you ask the man whether your uncle had gone mad?"

"Of course I did—in so many words. Man seemed to look on it as an astonishing suggestion. He said my uncle had long disapproved of my taking up painting as a profession, and now had arrived at the conviction that the best thing for me was a commercial career—a commercial career!"

So do Thrones and Dominations, I imagine, speak of the mundane avocations of a mere Angel.

"If you refuse, you'll be giving up three hundred a year now and heaven knows how much afterwards," said Clementina.

"And if I accepted I would be giving up my self-respect, my art, my dreams, everything that makes for Life—Life with the biggest of capital L's. By George, no! If my uncle won't listen to reason I'll not listen to unreason, and there's an end of it. I'll pull through somehow."

"Good," said Clementina, who had remained remarkably silent. "I was waiting to hear you say that. If you had hesitated I should have told you to go home and dine by yourself. A little starvation and struggle and fringe to your trousers will be the making of you. As for your uncle, if he's crazy he's crazy, and there's an end of it, as you say. Let's talk no more about it. What made you beg to come to dinner this evening?" she asked, with a resumption of her aggressive manner.

"The desire of the moth for the star," he laughed.

She responded in her grim way, and bade him amuse himself while she went upstairs to wash her face and hands. Clementina did wash her face, literally, scrubbing it with Old Brown Windsor soap and towelling it vigorously afterwards, thereby accomplishing, as her feminine acquaintances asserted, the ruin of her skin.

She rose and went to the foot of the stairs. Tommy's eye fell on the parrot-tulips in their white cornet.

"What are you going to do with those gaudy things?"

Clementina had forgotten them. The curious impulse of the blood that had led to their purchase had been spent. Tommy's news had puzzled her and had taken her mind off foolishness. She glanced at them somewhat ashamedly.

"Stick them in water, of course," she replied. "You don't suppose I'm going to wear them?"

"Why not?" cried Tommy, and, snatching out a great gold and crimson bloom, he held it against her black hair and swarthy brow. "By jove. You look stunning!"

Clementina, in a tone of some asperity, told him not to be a fool, and mounted the stairs with unaccountably burning cheeks.

At dinner, Tommy, inspired by more than three-fourths of the grocer's best bottle of champagne, talked glowingly of his prospects in the event of his uncle's craziness not being a transitory disorder. After all, the world was his oyster, and he knew the trick of opening it. Most people bungled, and jabbed their fingers through trying to prize it open at the wrong end. The wise man, said he, in the tone of an infant Solon, was he who not only made a mock of misfortune, but bent it to his own use as an instrument for the attainment of happiness. When challenged, he confessed that he got this gem of sapience out of a book. But it was jolly true, wasn't it? Really, he was looking forward to poverty. He was sick of silk hats and patent leather boots and the young women he met at tea-parties. Nature beat the lot. Nature for him. Thoreau—"The boy's going as cracked as his uncle!" cried Clementina—Thoreau, he

insisted, had found out the truth. He would give up his studio, take a labourer's cottage in the country at two shillings a week, live on lentils, paint immortal though perhaps not instantaneously remunerative landscapes by day and do all sorts of things with his pencil for the sake of a livelihood by night. He knew of a beautiful cottage, two rooms and a kitchen, near Hagbourne, in Berkshire. The place was a forest of cherry-trees. Nothing more breathlessly beautiful on the earth than the whole of a country-side quivering with cherry-blossom—except the same countryside when it was a purple mist of cherries. Geoffrey King had the cottage last summer. There was a bit of a garden which he could cultivate—cherry-trees in it, of course; also flowers and vegetables. He would supply Clementina with pansies and potatoes all the year round. There was a pigstye, too—useful in case he wanted to run a pig. When Clementina was tired of London, she could come to the cottage and he would sleep in the pigstye.

For the second time that day she asked:

"What will you want an old frump like me in the house for?"

"To look at my pictures," said Tommy.

Clementina sniffed. "I thought as much," she said. "Really, the callous selfishness of old age is saintlike altruism compared with the fresh, spontaneous egotism of youth."

Tommy, accustomed to her sharp sayings, only laughed boyishly. How was he to guess the history of the parrot-tulips? He was mildly surprised, however, when she decided to spend the evening, not in the studio, but in the stiff, Sheraton drawing-room. He protested. It was so much jollier in the studio. She asked why.

"This place has no character, no personality. It

looks like a show drawing-room in a furniture dealer's window. It has nothting to do with you. It means nothing."

"That's just why I want to sit in it," said Clementina. "You can go to the studio, if you like."

"That wouldn't be polite," said Tommy.

She shrugged her shoulders and sat down at the piano and played scraps of Mozart, Beethoven, and Grieg—memories of girlhood—with the inexpert musician's uncertainty of touch. Tommy wandered restlessly about the room examining the Bartolozzis and the backs of the books in the glass-protected cases. At last he became conscious of strain. He leant over the piano, and waited until she had broken down hopelessly in a fragment of Peer Gynt.

"Have I said or done anything wrong, Clementina? If so, I'm dreadfully sorry."

She shut the piano with a bang.

"You poor, motherless babe," she cried. "Who would you go to with your troubles, if you hadn't got me?"

Tommy smiled vaguely.

"Deuce knows," said he.

"Then let us go down to the studio and talk about them," said Clementina.

CHAPTER IX

AFTER leaving Clementina, Tommy went for a long brisk walk in order to clear his mind, and on his homeward way along the Embankment, branched off to the middle of old Chelsea Bridge in order to admire the moonlight view; he also took off his hat in order to get cool. The treacherous May wind cooled him effectually and sent him to bed for three days with a chill.

Clementina sat by his rueful bedside and rated him soundly. The idea of one just recovering from pneumonia setting his blood boiling hot and then cooling himself on a bridge at midnight in the bitter north-east wind! He was about as sane as his uncle. They were a pretty and well-matched pair. Both ought to be placed under restraint. A dark house and a whip would have been their portion in the good old times.

"I've got 'em both now," said Tommy, grinning. "This confounded bedroom is my dark house and your tongue is the whip."

"I hope it hurts like the devil," said Clementina.

Tommy wrote from his sick bed a dignified and manly letter to his uncle, and, like Brutus, paused for a reply. None came. Quixtus read it, and his warped vision saw ingratitude and hypocrisy in every line. He had already spoken to Griffiths about the office-stool in the Star Insurance Company. Tommy's emphatic refusal to sit on it placed him in an awkward position with regard to Griffiths. Openings in a large insurance office are not as common as those for hop-pickers in August. Griffiths, a sour tempered man at

times, would be annoyed. Quixtus, encouraged by Vandermeer, regarded himself as an ill used uncle, and not only missed all the thrill of his deed of wickedness, but accepted Tommy's decision as a rebuff to his purely benevolent intentions. He therefore added the unfortunate Tommy to the list of those whom he had tried and found wanting. He had a grievance against Tommy. Such is the topsy-turvey-dom of man after a little thread has snapped in his brain.

Now, it so happened that, on the selfsame day that Tommy crawled again into the open air, Clementina, standing before her easel and painfully painting drapery from the lay figure, suddenly felt the whole studio gyrate in a whirling maelstrom, into whose vortex of unconsciousness she was swiftly sucked. She fell in a heap on the floor, and remained there until she came to with a splitting headache and a sensation of carrying masses of bruised pulp at various corners of her body instead of limbs. Her maid, Eliza, finding her lying white and ill on the couch to which she had dragged herself, administered water—there was no such thing as smelling-salts in Clementina's house—and, on her own responsibility, summoned the nearest doctor. The result of his examination was a diagnosis of overwork. Clementina jeered. Only idlers suffered from overwork. Besides, she was as strong as a horse. The doctor reminded her that she was a woman, with a woman's delicately adjusted nervous system. She also had her sex's lack of restraint. A man, finding that he was losing sleep, appetite, control of temper and artistic grip, would abandon work and plunge utterly unashamed into hoggish idleness. A woman always feels that by fighting against weakness she is upholding the honour of her sex, and struggles on insanely till she drops.

"I'm glad you realise I'm a woman," said Clementina.

"Why?"

"Because you're the first man who has done so for many years."

The doctor, a youngish man, very earnest, of the modern neuropathic school, missed the note of irony. This was the first time he had ever seen Clementina.

"You're one of the most highly strung women I've ever come across," said he, gravely. "I want you to appreciate the fact and not to strain the tension to breaking-point."

"You wrap it up very nicely," said Clementina; "but, to put it brutally, your honest opinion is that I'm just a silly, unreasonable, excitable, sex-ridden fool of a female like a million others. Isn't that so?"

The young doctor bore the scrutiny of those glittering, ironical points of eyes with commendable professional stolidity.

"It is," said he, and in saying it he had the young practitioner's horrible conviction that he had lost an influential new patient. But Clementina stretched out her hand. He took it very gladly.

"I like you," she said, "because you're not afraid to talk sense. Now I'll do whatever you tell me."

"Go away for a complete change—anywhere will do—and don't think of work for a month at the very least."

"All right," said Clementina.

When Tommy, looking very much the worse for his relapse, came in the next day to report himself in robust health once more, Clementina acquainted him with her own bodily infirmities. It was absurd, she declared, that she should break down, but absurdity was the guiding principle of this comic planet. Holiday was ordained. She had spent a sleepless night

thinking how she should make it. Dawn had brought solution of the problem. Why not make it in fantastic fashion, harmonising with the absurd scheme of things?

"What are you going to do?" asked Tommy. "Spend a frolicsome month in Whitechapel, or put on male attire and go for a soldier?"

"I shall hire an automobile and motor about France."

"It's sporting enough," said Tommy, judicially, "but I should hardly call it fantastic."

"Wait till you've heard the rest," said Clementina. "I had originally intended to take Etta Concannon with me; but since you've come here looking like three-ha'porth of misery, I've decided to take you."

"Me?" cried Tommy. "My dear Clementina, that's absurd."

"I thought you would agree with me," said Clementina, "but I'm going to do it. Wouldn't you like to come?"

"I should think so!" he exclaimed, boyishly. "It would be gorgeous. But——"

"But what?"

"How can I afford to go motoring abroad?"

"You wouldn't have to afford it. You would be my guest."

"It's delightful of you, Clementina, to think of it —but it's impossible."

Whereupon an argument arose such as has often arisen between man and woman.

"I'm old enough to be your grandmother, or at least you think so, which comes to the same thing," said Clementina.

Tommy's young pride would not allow him to accept largesse from feminine hands, however elderly and unromantic.

"If I had a country house and hosts of servants and several motor-cars and asked you to stay, you'd come without hesitation."

"That would be different. Don't you see for yourself?"

Clementina chose not to see for herself. Here was a dolorous baby of a boy disinherited by a lunatic uncle, emaciated by illness and unable to work, refusing a helping hand just because it was a woman's. It was preposterous. Clementina grew angry. Tommy held firm.

"It's merely selfish of you. Don't you see I want a companion?"

Tommy pointed out the companionable qualities of Etta Concannon. But she would not hear of Etta. The sight of Tommy's wan face had decided her, and she was a woman who was accustomed to carry out her decisions. She was somewhat dictatorial, somewhat hectoring. She had taken it into her head to play fairy godmother to Tommy Burgrave, and she resented his repudiation of her godmotherdom. Besides, there were purely selfish reasons for choosing Tommy rather than Etta, which she acknowledged with inward candour. Tommy was a man who would fetch and carry and keep the chauffeur up to the mark, and inspire gendarmes and custom-house officials and maîtres-d'hotel with respect, and, although Clementina feared neither man nor devil, she was aware of the value of a suit of clothes filled with a male entity as a travelling adjunct to a lone woman. With Etta the case would be different. Etta would fetch her motor-veil and carry her gloves with the most adoringly submissive grace in the world; but all the real fetching and carrying for the two of them would have to be done by Clementina herself. Therein lay the difference between Clementina and the type generally known

as the emancipated woman. She had no exaggerated notions of the equality of the sexes, which in feminine logic generally means the high superiority of women. Circumstance had emancipated her from dependence upon the other sex, but on the circumstance and the emancipation she cast not too favourable an eye. She had a crystal clear idea of the substantial usefulness of men in this rough and not always ready cosmic scheme. Therefore, for purposes of utility, she wanted Tommy. In her usual blunt manner she told him so.

"You run in here at all hours of the day and night, and it's Clementina this and Clementina that until I can't call my soul my own—and now, the first time I ask you to do me a service you fall back on your silly little prejudices and vanity and pride, and say you can't do it."

"I'm very sorry," said Tommy, humbly.

"I tell you what it is," said Clementina, with a curiously vicious feminine stroke, "you'd come if I was a smart-looking woman with fine clothes who could be a credit to you—but you won't face going about with an animated rag-and-bone shop like me."

Tommy flushed as pink as only a fair youth can flush; he sprang forward and seized her wrists and, unwittingly, hurt her in his strong and indignant grip.

"What you're saying is abominable and you ought to be ashamed of yourself. If I thought anything like that I'd be the most infernal cur that ever trod the earth. I'd like to shake you for daring to say such things about me."

He flung away her hands and stalked off to the other end of the studio, leaving her with tingling wrists and unfindable retort.

"If you really think I can be of service to you," he

said, in a dignified way, having completed the return journey, "I shall be most happy to come."

"I don't want you to make a martyr of yourself," she snapped.

Tommy considered within himself for a moment or two, then broke into his boyish laugh.

"I'm an ungrateful pig, and I'll follow you all over the world. Dear old Clementina," he added, more seriously, putting his hand on her shoulder, "forgive me."

Clementina gently removed his hand. She preferred the grip on the wrists that hurt. But, mollified, she forgave him.

So in a few days they started on their travels.

The thirty-five horse-power car whirled them, a happy pair, through the heart of summer. Above the blue sky blazed, and beneath the white road gleamed a shivering streak. The exhilarating wind of their motion filled their lungs and set their tired pulses throbbing. Now and then, for miles, the great plane trees on each side of the way formed the never-ending nave of an infinite cathedral, the roof a miracle of green tracery. Through quiet, sun-baked villages they passed, at a snail's pace, hooting children and dogs from before their path—and because they proceeded slowly and Tommy was goodly to look upon, the women smiled from their doorways, or from the running laundry stream where they knelt and beat the wet clothes, or from the fountain in the cool, flagged little square jutting out like a tiny transept from the aisle of the street. Babies stared stolidly. Here and there a bunch of little girls, their hair tied in demure pigtails, the blue sarrau over their loud check frocks would laugh and whisper, and one more daring than the rest would wave an audacious hand, and when

Tommy blew her a kiss from his fingers there came the little slut's gracious response, amid mirth and delight unspeakable. Men would look up from their dusty, bare, uneven bowling-alley beneath the trees and watch them as they went by. An automobile, in spite of its frequency, is always an event in a French village. If it races mercilessly through, there is reasonable opportunity to curse, which always gladdens the heart of man. If it proceeds slowly and shows deference to the inhabitants, it is an event rare enough to command their admiration. Instead of shutting their eyes against a sort of hell-chariot in a whirlwind, they can observe the gracefully built car and its stranger though human occupants, which is something deserving a note in the record of an eventless day. If they stopped and quitted the car so as to glance at leisure at old church or quaint fountain—and in many an out-of-the-way village in France the water of the community gushes forth from a beautiful work of art—all the idlers of the sunny place clustered round the car, while the British chauffeur stood by the radiator, impeccably vestured and unembarrassed as a Fate. At noon came the break for déjeuner; preferably in some little world-forgotten townlet, where, after the hors-d'œuvre, omelette, cutlet, chicken, and fruit—and where is the sad, plague-stricken hamlet of France that cannot, in the twinkling of an eye, provide such a meal for the hungry wayfarer?—they loved to take their coffee beneath the awning of a café on the shady side of the great, sleepy square, and absorb the sleepy, sunny, prosperous spirit of the place; the unpainted bandstand in the centre, the low-lying houses with sleepy little shops and cafés—Heavens! how many cafés!—around it, the modern, model-built Hôtel de Ville, the fine avenue of plane trees without which no Grande Place in France could

exist, and, above the roofs of the houses, the weather-beaten, crumbling Gothic tower of the church surmounted by its extinguisher-shaped leaden belfry alive with vivid yellows and olives. And then the road again past the rapidly becoming familiar objects; the slow ox-carts; the herd of wayside goats in charge of a dirty, tow-headed child; the squad of canvas-suited soldiers; the great lumbering waggons drawn by a string of three gaudily and elaborately yoked horses, the driver fast asleep on the top of his mountainous load; the mongrel dogs that sought, and happily found not, euthanasia beneath the wheels of the modern car of Juggernaut; the sober-vested peasant women bending beneath their burdens with the calm, unexpressive faces of cariatides grown old and withered. Towards the later afternoon was reached the larger town where they would halt for the night: first came the eternal, but grateful, outer boulevard cool with foliage, running between newly built, perky houses and shops and then leading into the heart of the older city, grey, narrow-streeted, picturesque. As the automobile clattered through the great gateway of the hotel into the paved courtyard, out came the decent landlord and smiling landlady, welcomed their guests, summoned unshaven men in green-baize aprons—who, at dinner, were to appear in the decorous garb of waiters, and in the morning, by a subtle modification of costume (dingy white aprons instead of green-baize) were to do uncomplaining work as housemaids—to take down the luggage, and showed the travellers to their clean, bare rooms. After the summary removal of the journey's dust came the delicious saunter through the strange old town; the stimulus of the sudden burst into view of the west front of a cathedral, with its deeply recessed and sculptured doorways, and its great,

flamboyant window struck by the westering sun; the quick, indrawn breath of delight when, in a narrow, evil-smelling, cobble-paved street, they came unexpectedly upon some marvel of an early Renaissance façade, with its refined riot of ornament, its unerring proportions, its laughing dignity—laughing all the more and with all the more dignity, as became its mocking, aristocratic soul, because the ground floor was given up to a dingy tinsmith and its upper storeys to the same class of easy-going, slatternly folk who sat at the windows of the other unconsidered houses in the sallow and homely street; the gay relief of emerging from such unsavoury and foot-massacring byways into the quarter of the town on which the Syndicat d'Initiative prides itself—the wide, well-kept thoroughfare or *place* with its inevitable greenery, its flourishing cafés thick with decorous folk beneath the awnings, its proud and prosperous shops, its Municipal Theatre, Bourse, Hôtel de Ville, its generously spouting fountain, its statue of the great son—poet, artist, soldier—of the locality; its crowd of well-fed saunterers—fat and greasy citizens, the supercilious aristocrat and the wolf-eyed anarchist might perhaps join together in calling them—but still God's very worthy creatures; its general expression, not of the joy of life, for a provincial town is, as a whole, governed by conditions which affect only a part of a great capital, but of the undeniable usefulness and pleasurableness of human existence. Then, after dinner, out again to the cool terrace of a café—in provincial France no one lounges over coffee and tobacco in an hotel—and lastly to bed, with wind and sun in their eyes and in their hearts the peace of a beautiful land.

They had planned the first part of their route—Boulogne, Abbeville, Beauvais, Sens, Tonnerre, Dijon,

through the Côté d'Or and down the valley of the Rhone to Avignon. After that the roads of France were open to them to go whithersoever they willed. The ground, the experience, the freedom, all were new to them. To Clementina France had practically been synonymous with Paris—not Paris of the Grands Boulevards, Montmartre, and expensive restaurants, but Paris of the Left Bank, of the studios, of struggle and toil—a place not of gaiety but grimness. To Tommy it meant Paris, too—Paris of the young artist-tourist, a museum of great pictures—the Louvre, the Luxembourg, the Pantheon immortalised by Puvis de Chavannes; also Dieppe, Dinard, and such-like dependencies of Britain. But of the true France such as they beheld it now they knew nothing, and they beheld it with the wide-open eyes of children.

After a few days the weariness fell from Clementina's shoulders; new life sped through her veins. Her hard lips caught the long-forgotten trick of a smile. She almost lost the art of acid speech. She grew young again.

Tommy held the money-bag.

"I'm not going to look like a maiden aunt treating a small boy to buns at a confectioner's," she had declared. "I'm going to be a real lady for once and see what it's like."

So Clementina did nothing in the most ladylike manner, while Tommy played courier and carried through all arrangements with the impressive air of importance that only a young Briton in somebody else's motor-car can assume. He had forgotten the little sacrifice of his pride; he had forgotten, or at least he disregarded, with the precious irresponsibility of three-and-twenty, the fact that his income was reduced to the negligible quantity of a pound a week; he gave himself up to the enjoyment of the passing

hour, and if ever he did cast a forward glance at the clouded future, behold! the clouds were rosy with the reflections of the present sunshine.

He was proud of his newly discovered talent as a courier, and boasted in his boyish way:

"Aren't you glad you've got me to take care of you?"

"It's a new sensation for me to be taken care of."

"But you don't dislike it?"

He was arranging at the bottom of the car a pile of rugs and wraps as a footstool for Clementina, at the exact height and angle for her luxurious comfort.

Clementina sighed. She was beginning to like it very much indeed.

CHAPTER X

WHEN they swung round the great bend of the Rhone, and Vienne came in sight, Tommy uttered a cry of exultation.

"Oh Clementina, let us stay here for a week!"

When they stood an hour afterwards on the great suspension bridge that connects Vienne with the little town of Sainte-Colombe, and drank in the afternoon beauty of the place, Tommy amended his proposition.

"Oh Clementina," said he, "let us stay here for ever!"

Clementina sighed, and watched the broad blue river sweeping in its majestic curve between the wooded mountains from whose foliage peeped a myriad human habitations, the ancient Château-Fort de la Bâtie standing a brave and mutilated sentinel on its dominating hill, the nestling town with its Byzantine towers and tiled roofs, the Gothic west front of the Cathedral framed by the pylons of the bridge, the green boulevarded embankment and the fort of Sainte-Colombe in its broader and more smiling valley. guarded it, too, by its grim square tower, the laughing peace of the infinite web of afternoon shadow and afternoon sunlight. Away up the stream a barge moved slowly down under a sail of burnished gold. A few moments afterwards coming under the lee of the mountains, the sail turned into what Tommy, who had pointed it out, called a dream-coloured brown. From which it may be deduced that Tommy was growing poetical.

In former times Clementina would have rebuked so nonsensical a fancy. But now, with a nod, she acquiesced. Nay, more, she openly agreed.

"We who live in a sunless room in the midst of paint-pots, know nothing of the beauty of the world."

"That's true," said Tommy.

"We hope, when we're tired, that there is such a place as the Land of Dreams, but we imagine it's somewhere east of the sun, and west of the moon. We don't realise that all we've got to do to get there is to walk out of our front door."

"It all depends upon the inward eye, doesn't it?" said the boy. "Or, perhaps, indeed, it needs a double inward eye—two personalities, you know, harmonised in a subtle sort of way, so as to bring it into focus. You see what I mean? I don't think I could get the whole dreamy adorableness of this if I hadn't you beside me."

"Do you mean that, Tommy?" she asked, with eyes fixed on the Rhone.

"Of course I do," he replied, earnestly.

Her lips worked themselves into a smile.

"I never thought my personality could harmonise with any other on God's earth."

"You've lived a life of horrible, rank injustice."

She started, as if hurt. "Ah! don't say that."

"To yourself, I mean, dearest Clementina. You've never allowed yourself a good quality. Now you're beginning to find out your mistake."

"When it's pointed out that I can harmonise with your beautiful nature!"

At the flash of the old Clementina, Tommy laughed.

"I'm not going to deny that there's good in me. Why should I? If there wasn't, I shouldn't be here. You wouldn't have asked me to be your companion," he added quickly, fearing lest she might put a wrong

construction on his words. "When a good woman does a man the honour of admitting him to her intimate companionship, he knows he's good—and it makes him feel better."

Her left elbow rested on the parapet of the bridge, and her chin rested on the palm of her hand. Without looking at him she stretched out the other hand and touched him.

"Thank you for saying that, Tommy," she said in a low voice.

Their mutual relations had modified considerably during the journey. The change, in the first place, had come instinctively from Tommy. Hitherto, Clementina had represented little to his ingenuous mind but the rough-and-ready comrade, the good sort, the stunning portrait-painter. With many of his men friends he was on practically the same terms. Quite unconsciously he patronised her ever so little, as the Prince Charmings of life's fairy-tale are apt to patronise those who are not quite so charming or quite so princely as themselves. When he had dined with the proud and gorgeous he loved to strut before her aureoled in his reflected splendour; not for a moment remembering that had Clementina chosen to throw off her social nonconformity she could have sat in high places at the houses of such a proud and gorgeous hierarchy as he, Tommy Burgrave, could not hope, for many years, to consort with. Sometimes he treated her as an old family nurse, who spoiled him, sometimes as a bearded master; he teased her, chaffed her, laid traps to catch her sharp sayings; greeted her with "Hullo," and parted from her with an airy wave of the hand. But as soon as they set off on their travels the subtle change took place, for which the fact of his being her guest could only, in small degree, account. Being in charge of all arrangements, and

thus asserting his masculinity, he saw Clementina in a new light. For all her unloveliness she was a woman; for all her lack of convention she was a lady born and bred. She was as much under his protection as any dame or damsel of the proud and gorgeous to whom he might have had the honour to act as escort; and without a moment's self-consciousness he began to treat Clementina with the same courteous solicitude as he would have treated such dame or damsel, or, for the matter of that, any other woman of his acquaintance. Whereas, a month or two before he would have tramped by her side for miles without the thought of her possible fatigue entering his honest head, now her inability to stroll about the streets of these little provincial towns, without physical exhaustion, caused him grave anxiety. He administered to her comfort in a thousand ways. He saw to the proper working of the shutters in her room, to the smooth opening of the drawers and presses; put the fear of God into the hearts of chamber-maids and valets through the medium of a terrific lingua franca of his own invention; supplied her with flowers; rose early every morning to scour the town for a *New York Herald* so that it could be taken up to Clementina's room with her coffee, and *petit croissant.* His habit of speech, too, became more deferential, and his discourse gained in depth and sincerity what it lost in picturesque vernacular. To sum up the whole of the foregoing in a phrase, Tommy's attitude towards Clementina grew to be that of an extremely nice boy towards an extremely nice maiden aunt.

This change of attitude acted very powerfully on Clementina. As she had remarked, it was a new sensation to be taken care of: one which she liked very much indeed. All the sternly repressed feminine in her—all that she called the silly fool woman—re-

sponded to the masculine strength and delicacy of touch. She, on her side, saw Tommy in a new light. He had developed from the boy into the man. He was responsible, practical, imperious in his frank, kindly, Anglo-Saxon way. It was a new joy for the woman, who, since girlhood, had fought single-handed for her place in the world, to sit still and do nothing while difficulties vanished before his bright presence just as the crests of alarming steeps vanished before the irresistible rush of the car.

Once when a loud report and the grinding of the wheels announced a puncture, she cried involuntarily:

"I'm so glad!"

Tommy laughed. "Well, of all the feminine reasons for gladness!"—Clementina basked in her femininity like a lizard in the sun. "I suppose it's because you can sit in the shade and watch Johnson and me toiling and broiling like niggers on the road."

She blushed beneath her swarthy skin. That was just it. She loved to see him throw off his coat and grapple like a young Hercules with the tyre. For Johnson's much more efficient exertions she cared not a scrap.

Her heart was full of new delights. It was a new delight to feel essentially what she in her irony used to term a lady; to be addressed with deference and tenderness, to have her desires executed just that instant before specific formulation which gives charm and surprise. Every day she discovered a new and unsuspected quality in Tommy, and every evening she dwelt upon the sweetness, freshness, and strength of his nature. The lavender fragrance, the nice maiden-aunt-ity of her relations with Tommy, I am afraid she missed.

It gave her an odd little thrill of pleasure when Tommy propounded his theory of the perfect focal

adjustment of the good in their natures. When he implicitly gave her rank as angel she was deeply moved. So she stretched out her hand and touched him and said, "Thank you."

"You said nothing about my proposal to stay here for ever," he remarked, after a while.

"I'm quite ready," she replied absently. "Why shouldn't we?"

Tommy pointed out a white château that flashed through the greenery of the hill behind the cathedral.

"That's the place we'll take. We'll fill it with books—chiefly sermons, and flowers—chiefly poppies, and we'll smoke hashish instead of tobacco, and we'll sleep and paint dream-pictures all the rest of our lives."

"I suppose you can't conceive life—even a dream life—without pictures to paint in it?"

"Not exactly," said he. "Can you?"

"I shouldn't be painting pictures in my dream-life."

"What would you be doing?"

But Clementina did not reply. She looked at the brave old sentinel fort glowing red in the splendour of the westering sun. Tommy continued—"I'm sure you would be painting. How do you think a musician could face an existence without music? or a golfer without golf?" and he broke into his fresh laugh. "I wonder what dream-golf would be like? It would be a sort of mixed arrangement, I guess, with stars for balls and clouds for bunkers and meads of asphodels for putting greens." He suddenly lifted his hands, palm facing palm, and looked through them at the framed picture. "Clementina dear, if I don't get that old Tour de la Bâtie with the sunset on it, I'll die. It will take eternity to get it right, and that's why we must stay here forever."

"We'll stay as long as you like," said Clementina, "and you can paint to your heart's content."

"You're the dearest thing in the world," said Tommy.

Dinner time drew near. They left the bridge reluctantly, and mounted the great broad flight of forty steps that led to the west door of the Cathedral. A few of the narrow side streets brought them into the Place Miremont, where their hotel was situated. In the lazy late afternoon warmth it looked the laziest and most peaceful spot inhabited by man. The square, classic Town Library, hermetically closed, its inner mysteries hidden behind drawn blinds, stood in its midst like a mausoleum of dead and peaceful thoughts. Nothing living troubled it save a mongrel dog asleep on the steps. No customer ruffled the tranquillity of the shops around the *Place*. A red-trousered, blue-coated little soldier—so little that he looked like a toy soldier—and an old man in a blouse, who walked very slowly in the direction of the café, were the only humans on foot. Even the hotel omnibus, rattling suddenly into the square, failed to break the spell of quietude. For it was empty, and its emptiness gave a pleasurable sense of distance from the fever and the fret of life.

It is even said that Pontius Pilate found peace in Vienne, lying, according to popular tradition, under a comparatively modern monolith termed the Aiguille.

"Are you quite sure this place isn't too dead-and-alive for you?" Clementina asked, as they approached the hotel.

He slid his hand under her arm.

"Oh no!" he cried, with a little reassuring squeeze. "It's heavenly."

While she was cleansing herself for dinner, Clementina looked in the glass. Her hair, as usual, straggled

untidily over her temples. She wore it bunched up anyhow in a knot behind, and the resentful hair-pins invariably failed in their office. This evening she removed the faithful few, the saving remnant that for the world's good remains in all communities, even of hair-pins, and her hair thick and black fell about her shoulders. She combed it, brushed it, brought it up to the top of her head and twisting it into a neat coil held it there with her hand, and for a moment or two studied the effect somewhat dreamily. Then, all of a sudden, a change of mood swept over her. She let the hair down again, almost savagely wound it into its accustomed clump into which she thrust hair-pins at random, and turned away from the mirror, her mouth drawn into its old grim lines.

Tommy found her rather uncommunicative at dinner which was served to them at a separate side table. At the table d'hôte in the middle of the room, eight or nine men, habitués and commercial travellers fed in stolid silence. She ate little. Tommy, noticing it, openly reproached himself for having caused her fatigue. The day in the open air—and open air pumped into the lungs at the rate of thirty or forty miles an hour—was of itself tiring. He ought not to have dragged her about the town. Besides, he added with an appearance of great wisdom, a surfeit of beauty gave one a soul-ache. They had feasted on nothing but beauty since they had left Chalon-sur-Saône that morning. He, too, had a touch of soul-ache; but luckily it did not interfere with his carnal appetite. It ought not to interfere with Clementina's. Here was the whitest and tenderest morsel of chicken that ever was and the crispest bit of delectable salad. He helped her from the dish which she had refused at the hands of the waiter, and she ate meekly. But after dinner, she sent him off to the café by himself, saying

that she would read a novel in the salon and go to bed early.

The loneliness of the salon, instead of resting her, got on her nerves, which angered her. What business had she, Clementina Wing, with nerves? Or was Tommy right? Perhaps it was soul-ache from which she was suffering. Certainly, one strove to pack away into oneself anything of beauty, making it a part of one's spiritual being. One could be a glutton and suffer from the consequences. The soul-ache, if such it were, had nothing of origin in the emotions that had prompted her touch on Tommy's arm, or the coiling of her hair on the top of her head. Nothing at all. Besides, it was a very silly novel, a modern French version of Daphnis and Chloe, in which Daphnis figured as a despicable young neuropath whom Tommy would have kicked on sight, and Chloe, a demure hussy whom a sensible mother would have spanked. She threw it into a corner and went to her room to brace her mind with Tristram Shandy.

She had not been long there, however, when there came a knocking at her door. On her invitation to enter, the door opened and Tommy stood breathless on the threshold. His eyes were bright and he was quivering with excitement.

"Do come out. Do come out and see something. I hit upon it unawares, and it knocked me silly. I've run all the way back to fetch you."

"What is it?"

"Something too exquisite for words."

"What about the soul-ache?"

"Oh! Let us have an orgy while we're about it," he cried recklessly. "It's worth it. Do come. I want you to feel the thing with me."

The appeal was irresistible. It was spirit summoning spirit. Without thinking, but dimly conscious of

a quick throbbing of the heart, Clementina put on her hat and went with Tommy out of the hotel. The full moon blazed from a cloudless sky, flooding the little silent square. She paused on the pavement.

"Yes, it's beautiful," she said.

"Oh—that's only the silly old moon," cried Tommy. "I've got something much better for you than that."

"What is it?" she asked again.

"You wait," said he.

He took her across the square, through two or three turns of narrow cobble-paved streets, whirled her swiftly round a corner and said:

"Look!"

Clementina looked, and walked straight into the living heart of the majesty that once was Rome. There, in the midst of an open space, the modern houses around it obscured, softened, de-characterised by the magic-working moon, stood in its proud and perfect beauty the Temple of Augustus and Livia. Twenty centuries, with all their meaning, vanished in a second. It was the heart of Rome. There was the great Temple, perfect, imperishable, with its fluted Corinthian columns, its entablature, its pediment, its noble cornice throwing endless mysteries of shadow. No ruin, from which imagination flogged by scholarship might dimly picture forth what once had been; but the Temple itself, untouched, haughty, defying Time, the companion for two thousand years of the moon that now bathed it lovingly, as a friend of two thousand years' standing must do, in its softest splendour, and sharing with the moon its godlike scorn of the hectic and transitory life of man.

Clementina drew a sharp breath of wonder. Moisture clouded her eyes. She could not speak for the suddenness of the shock of beauty. Tommy gently took her arm, and they stood for a long time in si-

lence, close together. In their artists' sensitiveness they were very near together, too, in spirit. She glanced at his face in the moonlight, alive with the joy of the thing, and her heart gave a sudden leap. All the beauty of the day translated itself into something even more radiant that flooded her soul, causing the rows of fluted columns to swim before her eyes until she shut them with a little sigh of content.

At last they moved and walked slowly round the building.

"I just couldn't help fetching you," said Tommy.

"Oh, I'm glad you did. Oh, so glad. Why didn't we know of this before we came."

"Because we are two thrice-blessedly ignorant cockneys, dear. I hate to know what I'm going to see. It's much better to be like stout Cortez and his men in the poem and discover things, isn't it? By Jove, I shall never forget running into this."

"Nor I," said Clementina.

"The moment the car turned the bend to-day I knew something was going to happen here."

More had happened than Tommy dreamed of in his young philosophy. Nor did Clementina enlighten him. She slid his arm from under hers and took it, and leaned ever so little on it, for the first time for many, many years a happy woman.

When they left the Temple she pleaded for an extension of their walk. She was no longer tired. She could go on forever beneath such a moon.

"A night made for lovers," said Tommy, "and we aren't the only ones—look!"

And indeed there were couples sauntering by, head to head, talking of the things the moon had heard so many million times before.

"I suppose they take us also for lovers," said Clementina foolishly.

"I don't care if they do," said Tommy. "Let us pretend."

"Yes," said Clementina. "Let us pretend."

They wandered thus lover-like through the town, and came on the quay where they sat on the coping of the parapet, and watched the moonlit Rhone and the brave old Château-Fort on the hill.

"Are you glad you came with me?" she asked.

"It has been a sort of enchanted journey," he replied, seriously. "And to-night—well, to-night is just to-night. There are no words for it. I've never thanked you—there are things too deep for thanks. In return I would give you everything I've got—in myself, you know—if you wanted it. In fact," he added, with a boyish laugh, "I've given it to you already whether you want it or not."

"I do want it, Tommy," she said, with a catch in her voice. "You don't know how much I want it."

"Then you have a devoted, devoted, devoted slave for the rest of your life."

"I do believe you are fond of me."

"Fond of you!" he cried. "Why, of course, I am. There's not another woman like you in the world." He took her hand and kissed it. "Bless you," he said. Then he rose. "We've sat out here long enough. Your hands are quite cold and you've only that silly blouse on. You'll catch a chill."

"I'm quite warm," said Clementina mendaciously; but she obeyed him with surprising meekness.

If any one had had a sufficiently fantastic imagination and sufficient audacity to prophesy to Clementina before she started from London the effect upon her temperament of a Roman Temple and moonshine, she would have said things in her direct way uncomplimentary to his intelligence. She would have forgotten her own epigram to the effect that woman always

has her sex hanging round the neck of her spirit. But her epigram had proved its truth. She was feeling a peculiar graciousness in the focal adjustment above considered, was letting her spirit soar with its brother to planes of pure beauty, when lo! suddenly, spirit was hurled from the empyrean into the abyss by the thing clinging round its neck, which took its place on the said planes with a pretty gurgle of exultation.

That is what had happened.

And is it not all too natural? There are plants which will keep within them a pallid life in a coal-cellar—but put in the sun and the air and the rain will break magically into riotous leaf and bud and flower. Love, foolish, absurd, lunatic, reprehensible—what you will—had come into the sun and the air and the rain, and it had broken magically into blossom. Of course, she had no business to bring it into the air; she ought to have kept it in the coal-cellar; she ought not to have let the door be opened by the wheedlings of a captivating youth. In plain language, a woman of six-and-thirty ought never to have fallen in love with a boy of twenty-three. Of course not. A vehement passionate nature is the easiest thing in the world to keep under control. A respectable piece of British tape ought to be strong enough leash for any tiger of the jungle.

That Clementina, ill-favoured and dour, should have given herself up, in the solitude of her room, to her intoxication is, no doubt, a matter of censure. It was mad and bad and sad, but it was sweet. It was human. The rare ones from whom no secrets of a woman's pure heart are hid might say that it was divine. But the many who pity let them not grudge her hour of joy to a woman of barren life.

But it was only an hour. The grey dawn crept into

the sleepless room, and the glamour of the moonlight had gone. And there was a desperate struggle in the woman's soul. The boy's words rang in her ears. He was fond of her, devoted to her, would give up his life to her. He spoke sincerely. Why should she not take the words at a little above their face-value? No strong-natured woman of six-and-thirty, with Clementina's fame and wealth and full great sympathy need fear rebuff from a generous lad who professes himself to be her devoted, devoted, devoted slave. All she has to do is to put up the banns. Whether ultimate bliss will be achieved is another matter. But to marry him out of hand is as easy as lying. It did not need Clementina's acute intelligence for her to be fully aware of this. And another temptation crept over her pillow to her ear, peculiarly insidious. The boy would be free to pursue his beloved art without sordid cares. There would be no struggle and starvation and fringed hems to his trousers. A woman who really loves a man would sooner her heart were frayed than his trouser-hems.

She rose and threw wide the shutters. The little Place Miremont looked ghostly in the white light, and the classic Bibliothèque, with its round-headed windows, more than ever a calm mausoleum of human wisdom. It is strange how coldly suggestive of death is the birth of day.

Clementina crept back to bed and, tired out, fell asleep. The waiter bringing in the breakfast tray awakened her. On the *New York Herald* which Tommy had gone to the railway station to procure, lay a dewy cluster of red and yellow roses; on a plate a pile of letters, the top one addressed in Etta Concannon's great girlish scrawl.

Why in the world should a bunch of parrot-tulips have flared before her eyes? They did. They had

marked the beginning of it. The red and yellow roses marked the end.

"*Attendez un moment,*" she said to the waiter, while she tore open the envelope and glanced through Etta's unimportant letter. "Bring me a telegraph form."

He produced one from his pocket. If you ask a waiter in a good French provincial hotel for anything —a copy of Buckle's History of Civilisation or a boot-jack—he will produce it from his pocket. He also handed her a pencil.

This she bit musingly for a few seconds. Then she scribbled hastily on a telegraph form:

"*Join me at once. Book straight through to Lyons. Wire train. Will meet you at station. Promise you*" —Her lips twisted into a wry smile as the word she sought entered her head—"*heavenly time. My guest of course. Clementina. Hôtel du Nord, Vienne.*"

"By the way, *garçon,*" she said, handing him the telegram, "why is this called the Hôtel du Nord?"

"*Parceque, Madame, c'est ici, à Vienne, que commence le Midi,*" replied the waiter.

He bowed himself out. A courtier of Versailles at the levée of the Pompadour could not have made his speech and exit with better grace.

Later in the day Clementina received the reply from Etta.

"*You darling, starting to-morrow. Arrive Lyons seven o'clock morning Thursday.*"

Tommy, fired by the picture made by the bend of the Rhone and the Château-Fort de la Bâtie, spent most of the day on the quay, with the paraphernalia of his trade, easel and canvas and box of colours and brushes, painting delightedly, while Clementina, beneath an uncompromising white umbrella with a green lining, bought on her travels, sat near by reading

many tales out of one uncomprehended novel. Just before dinner she informed him of the almost immediate arrival of Etta Concannon.

"Oh, I say!" he exclaimed in an injured voice. "That spoils everything."

"I don't think so," said Clementina.

CHAPTER XI

CLEMENTINA motored to Lyons by herself, dined in gaunt and lonely splendour at the Grand Hotel, and met Etta Concannon's train very early the next morning. Etta, dewy fresh after her all-night train journey, threw her arms round her neck and kissed her effusively. She was a heaven-born darling, a priceless angel, and various other hyperbolical things. Yes, she had had a comfortable journey; no trouble at all; all sorts of nice men had come to her aid at the various stages. She had been up since five standing in the corridor and looking at the country which was fascinating. She had no idea it was so full of interest.

"And did one of the nice men get up at five, too, and stand in the corridor?" asked Clementina.

The girl flushed and laughed. "How did you guess? I couldn't help it. How could I? And it was quite safe. He was ever so old."

"I'm glad I've got you in charge now," said Clementina.

"I'll be so good, dear," said the girl.

The luggage secured, they drove off. Etta's eyes sparkled, as they went through the ugly, monotonous, clattering streets of Lyons.

"What an adorable town!"

As it was not even lit by the cheap glamour of the sun, for the sky was overcast and threatening, it looked peculiarly depressing to normal vision. But youth found it adorable. O thrice blessed blindness of youth!

"What has happened to Mr. Burgrave?" she asked

after a while. "I suppose his time was up and he had to go back."

"Oh, no," said Clementina coolly. "He's at Vienne."

"Oh-h!" said Etta, with a little touch of reproach. "I thought it was just going to be you and I and us two."

"We'll put him in front next to Johnson and have the back of the car all to ourselves. But I thought you liked Tommy Burgrave."

"He's quite harmless," said Etta carelessly.

"And he thinks of nothing in the world but his painting, so he won't bother his head much about you," said Clementina.

Etta fell at once into the trap. "I'm not going to let him treat me as if I didn't exist," she cried. "I'm afraid you've been spoiling him, darling. Men ought to be shown their place and taught how to behave."

His behaviour, however, on their first meeting was remarkably correct. The car, entering Vienne, drew up by the side of the quay where he had pitched his easel. He rose and ran to greet its occupants with the most welcoming of smiles, which were not all directed at Clementina. Etta had her share. It is not in the nature of three-and-twenty to look morosely on so dainty a daughter of Eve—all the daintier by contrast with the dowdy elder woman by her side. Tommy had spoken truly when he had professed his downright honest affection for Clementina; truly also when he had deprecated the summoning of the interloping damsel. But he had not counted on the effect of contrast. He had seen Etta in his mind's eye as just an ordinary young woman who would disturb that harmonious adjustment of artistic focus on whose discovery he had prided himself so greatly. Now he realised

her freshness and dewiness and goodness to look upon. She adorned the car; made quite a different vehicle of it. Standing by the door he noticed how passers-by turned round and glanced at her with the frank admiration of their race. Tommy at once felt himself to be an enviable fellow; he was going to take a great pride in her; at the lowest, as a mere travelling adjunct, she did him credit. Clementina watched him shrewdly, and the corners of her mouth curled in an ironical twist.

"It isn't my fault, Miss Concannon, that I didn't come to Lyons to meet you. Clementina wouldn't let me. You know what a martinet she is. So I was here all last evening simply languishing in loneliness."

"Why wouldn't you let poor Mr. Burgrave come to Lyons, Clementina?" laughed Etta.

"If you begin to pester me with questions," replied Clementina, "I'll pack you off to England again."

"All enquiries to be addressed to the courier," said Tommy.

"And you'll answer them?"

"Every one," said Tommy.

Thus the freemasonry of youth was at once established between them. Etta smiled sweetly on him as the car drove off to the hotel, and Tommy returned to his easel with the happy impression that everything, especially the intervention of interloping damsels, was for the best in this best of all possible worlds.

They met shortly afterwards at déjeuner, the brightest of meals, whereat Etta talked her girlish nonsense, which Tommy took for peculiarly sparkling discourse. Clementina, wearing the mask of the indulgent chaperon, let the babble flow unchecked.

"Do you think Etta will spoil everything?" she asked him as soon as they were alone for a moment.

"Oh, no," cried the ingenuous Tommy. "She's going to be great fun."

"H'm!" said Clementina, feeling as though she might make the historic reply of the frog at whom the boys threw stones. But she had deliberately brought about the lapidation. She winced; but she could not complain.

It must not be imagined, however, that Tommy transferred his allegiance in youth's debonair, thoughtless way to the newer and prettier princess. On the contrary, in all the little outward shows of devotion he demonstrated himself more zealously than ever to be Clementina's vassal. In the excursions that they made during the next few days keeping Vienne as a base—to La Tour du Pin, Grenoble, Saint-Marcellin, Mont-Pilat—it was to Clementina that he turned and pointed out the beauties of the road, and her unsteady footsteps that he guided over rough and declivitous paths. To her he also turned for serious conversation. The flowers and *The New York Herald* came to her room as unfailingly as the morning coffee. He manifested the same tender solicitude as to her possible sufferings from hunger, drought, dust or fatigue. He paid her regal honour. In this he was aided and abetted by Etta Concannon, who had her own pretty ways of performing homage. In fact, the care of Clementina soon became at once a rivalry and a bond between them, and Clementina, so far from being neglected, found herself the victim of emulous and sometimes embarrassing ministrations. As she herself phrased it in a moment of bitter irony, they were making love over her live body.

They left Vienne, Tommy having made sufficient studies for immortal studio paintings, and took up their quarters at Valence. There is a spaciousness about

Valence rare in provincial towns of France. You stand in the middle of wide boulevards, the long vista closed at one end by the far blue tops of the mountains of the Vivarais, and at the other by the distant Alps, and you think you are dwelling in some sweet city in the air. In the clear sunshine it is as bright and as crisp as a cameo.

"I love Vienne, but I adore Valence," said Etta Concannon. "Here I can breathe."

They were sitting on the terrace of a café in the Place de la République in front of the great monument to Emile Augier. It was the cool of the evening, and a fresh breeze came from the mountains.

"I, too, am glad to get out of Vienne," said Clementina.

Tommy protested. "That's treason, Clementina. We had such ripping times there. Do you remember the evening I fetched you out to see the Temple of Augustus and Livia?"

Clementina gave one of her non-committal grunts. She did indeed remember it. But for that night the three of them would not have been sitting together over coffee at Valence.

"Tommy's so sentimental," Etta remarked.

"Since when have you been calling him 'Tommy'?" asked Clementina.

"We fixed that up this afternoon," he said cheerfully. "'Mr. Burgrave' suggests an afternoon party where one carts tea and food about—not a chummy motor tour."

"We agreed to adopt each other as cousins," said Etta.

"We were kind of lonely, you know," laughed Tommy. "We happen to have no cousins of our own, and, besides, you deserted us to-day, and we felt like two abandoned babes in the car."

"I don't think you were much to be pitied," said Clementina.

In pursuance of her scheme of self-annihilation she had several times sent them out on jaunts together, while she herself went for a grim walk in the dust and heat. This afternoon Etta had returned radiant. She had had the time of her life, and Tommy was the dearest thing that ever happened. Etta was addicted to the hyperbole of her generation. At dinner Tommy had admitted the general amenity of their excursion to Valence Crest—and now came the avowal of the establishment of their cousinly and intimate relations. The scheme was succeeding admirably. How could it fail? Throw together two bright, impressionable and innocent young humans of opposite sexes, and of the same social position, link them by a common tie, let them spend hours in each other's company, withdraw the ordinary restrictions that limit the intercourse of such beings in everyday society, bathe them in sunshine and drench their souls with beauty, and you have the Garden of Eden over again, the Serpent being replaced by his chubby and winged successor. The result is almost inevitable. But you can withdraw with certainty the qualifying adverb, when one of the potentially high contracting parties has been suffering from heart-scratch, and has announced her intention of becoming a hospital nurse.

I am quite aware that in the eyes of the world Clementina's conduct was outrageous. Etta was the only child of a wealthy admiral; Tommy, a penniless painter. Admiral Concannon had confidently entrusted his daughter to her care and had not the least idea of what was going on. When the disastrous story should reach his ears, he would foam righteously at the mouth, and use, with perfect justification, the most esoteric of quarter-deck language. I do not attempt

to defend Clementina. All the same, you must remember that in Tommy Burgrave she was giving to Etta as a free gift her most priceless possession. Tommy in her eyes was the real Prince Charming—at present, as often happens in fairy tales, under a cloud, but destined in real life, as in the fairy tales, to come, by a speedy wave of the magic wand, into his principality. As to the waving of the magic wand, she had her own ideas. She was quite prepared to weather the admiral's storm.

"There was never anything so sudden but the fight of two rams," is Rosalind's startling description of the courtship between Oliver and Celia. These lovers, however, were Elizabethans who did things in a large, splendid and unhesitating way. The case with Tommy and Etta, who were moderns, governed by all kinds of subtleties and delicacies, three centuries' growth, was not quite so instantaneous. The ordinary modern youth and maiden, of such clean upbringing, walk along together, hand in hand in perfect innocence, for a long time, never realising that they are in love with one another till something happens. The maiden may be sent into the country by an infuriated mother. Hence revelation with anguish. The indiscreet jesting of a friend, a tragedy causing both to come hard against the bed-rock facts of life, may shatter the guileless shell of their love. I know of two young things who came by the knowledge through bumping their heads together beneath a table while searching for a fallen penny. A shock, a jar is all that is needed. But with Tommy and Etta nothing yet had happened. They walked along together sweetly imagining themselves to be fancy-free. If the truth were known it would be found that the main subject of their conversation was Clementina.

When the time came for them to leave the café,

Tommy helped both ladies to put on their jackets. The human warmth of the crowded terrace sheltered from the mountain breeze by the awnings had rendered wraps unnecessary. But outside they discovered the air to be chill. Clementina first was invested—with the slightest hint of hurry. She turned and saw Tommy snatch Etta's jacket from a far too ready waiter's hand. In his investiture of Etta there was the slightest hint of lingering. In the nice adjustment of the collar their fingers touched. The girl raised laughing eyes which he met tenderly. A knife was thrust through Clementina's heart, and she closed her thin lips tightly to dissimulate the pain.

Etta came into her room that night under the vague pretence of playing maid and helping her to undress. Her aid chiefly consisted in sitting on the bed and chattering out of a birdlike happiness.

"It's all just heaven," she declared. "I wish I could show you how grateful I am. I've had nothing like it all my life. When I get home I won't rest till I've teased father into getting a car—he's so old-fashioned, you know, and thinks his fat old horses and the family omnibus make up the only equipage for a gentleman. But I'll worry him into a car, and then we'll go all over Europe. But it won't be quite the same without—without you, Clementina, dear."

Clementina wriggled into an old flannel dressing jacket and began to roll a cigarette.

"I thought you were going to be a hospital nurse."

"So did I," said the girl, a shadow flitting swiftly over her face. "But I don't seem to want to now. I should hate it."

"What has made you change your mind?" asked Clementina, after the first puff of smoke.

Etta, on the bed, nursed her knee. Her fair hair fell in a mass about her shoulders. She looked the picture

of innocence—a female child Samuel out of an illustrated Family Bible.

"The sight of you, darling, at Lyons Station."

"Little liar!" murmured Clementina.

But she forebore to question the girl further. She had no intention of supplying the necessary shock above mentioned. The observance of the gradual absorption of these two young souls one in the other was far too delicious an agony to be wantonly broken. Besides, it hardened her nature (so she fondly imagined) dried up the newly found well-head of passion, reduced the soft full woman back to the stony-hearted, wooden-faced, bitter-tongued, cynical, portrait-painting automaton, the enviable, self-mutilated Clementina of a few months ago. When a woman wants to punish herself she does so conscientiously. The offending Eve should be thoroughly whipped out of her.

The car of thirty-five million dove-power sped through the highways of sunny France—through enchanted forest glades, over mountains of the moon, through cities of wonderland, so, at least, it seemed to two young souls. For Clementina, alas! the glamour of sky and sunshine and greenery had departed. For Johnson, happy possessor of a carburation in lieu of a temperament, it had never existed. From Valence they struck north-west, through St. Etienne, Roanne, Nevers, Bourges. It was at Bourges that she came upon the two young people unawares.

She had entered, not knowing where they were, for they had gone off together, the cloistered courtyard of the Hôtel de Jacques Cœur. Now the cloister forms an arcaded gallery a few feet above the ground, which is reached by a flight of steps. She heard voices, approached hidden from them, beheld the pair sitting on the bottom step, in the coöl shadow.

"I should never get the whole adorableness of this," said Tommy, "if I hadn't you beside me. You and I seem to be like the two barrels of a field-glass—adjusted to one focus."

Clementina, hugging the wall, tip-toed out of the cloister. There was only one alternative, a whirlwind, a hurricane of a temptation which she was strong enough to resist: to descend then and there and box his ears soundly.

CHAPTER XII

WHILE Clementina, in her own fashion, was shattering an idyll to pieces, Quixtus, under the tutelage of Billiter, pursued the most distasteful occupation in which he had ever engaged. Had some Rhadamanthine Arbiter of his Destiny compelled him, under penalty of death, to choose between horse-racing and laborious practice as a solicitor, he would unhesitatingly have chosen the latter. Course and stand and paddock and ring, the whole machinery of the sport, wearied him to exasperation. Just as there are some men to whom, as the saying goes, music is the most expensive form of noise, so are there others to whom the racing of horses is merely the most extravagantly cumbersome form of gambling. Why train valuable animals, they ask, to run round a field, when the same end could be attained by making little leaden horses gyrate mechanically round a disk, at a millionth part of the cost? Of the delight of studying pedigree, of following form, of catching the precious trickles of information that percolate through the litter of stables, of backing their judgment thus misguided they have no notion. They cannot even feel a thrill of excitement at the sight of the far-off specks of galloping horses. They wonder at the futility of it all as the quadrupeds scrabble down the straight. An automobile, they plead, can go ten times as fast. That such purblind folk exist is sad; but after all they are God's creatures, just the same as jockeys and professional tipsters.

At first there was one feature of the race-course which fascinated Quixtus—the ring. Then he imagined he had come into contact with incarnate evil. Those coarse animal faces, swollen with the effort of bawling the odds, those hard greedy eyes bulging from purple cheeks, those voices raucous, inhuman, suggested to his mild fancy a peculiarly depraved corner of Tophet. But what practical evil resulted from this Masque of Hades was not quite apparent. Nobody seemed any the worse. The bookmaker smiled widely on those who won, and those who lost smiled on the world with undaunted cheerfulness. So, in the course of time, Quixtus began to regard the bookmakers with feelings of disappointment, which gave place after a while to indifference, and eventually to weariness and irritation.

Even Old Joe Jenks, thick-necked, fishy-eyed villain, to whom Billiter personally introduced him, proved himself, in all his dealings, to be a scrupulously honest man. The turf, in spite of its depressing ugliness, appeared but a manœuvring ground for the dull virtues. Where was its wickedness? He complained at length to Billiter.

Billiter seemed for the moment to be in a bad humour. He tugged at his heavy moustache.

"I don't see what fault you can find with racing. You're making a very good thing out of it."

Which was true. Fortune, who had played him such scurvy tricks, was now turning on him her sunniest smile. He was winning prodigiously, fantastically. Billiter selected the horses which he was to back, he backed them to the amount advised by Billiter, and in most instances the horses won.

"If you think the mere gaining of money gives me any pleasure, my dear Billiter," said he, "you're very much mistaken. I have sufficient means of my own to

satisfy my modest requirements, and to accept large sums of money from your friend, Mr. Jenks, is humiliating and repulsive."

"If that's the matter, you can turn them over to me," said Billiter. "I don't get much out of the business."

They were walking about the paddock, between the races. Quixtus halted and regarded his morose companion with cold enquiry.

"You gave me to understand that you were betting on the same horses as I was."

Billiter cursed himself for an incautious fool.

"Only now and then," said he, "and for small stakes. How can I afford to plunge like you?"

"What is the dismal quadruped I am betting on for this next race?" asked Quixtus, looking at his card.

"Punchinello. Forty-five to one. Dead cert."

"Then," said Quixtus, "here are five pounds. Put them on Punchinello and if he wins you will have two hundred and twenty-five."

Billiter left him, made his way out of the paddock to that part of the race-course where the outside bookmakers have their habitation. Old Joe Jenks, in the flaming check suit and a white hat adorned with his name and quality, stood on a stool shouting the odds, taking bets and giving directions to the clerk at his side. Business for a moment was slack.

"Another fiver for the governor on Punchinello," said Billiter.

Old Joe Jenks jumped from his stool and took Billiter aside.

"Look here, old friend," said he, "chuck it. Come off it. I'm not playing any more. I poured a couple of quarts of champagne over your head because you told me you had got hold of a mug, and instead of the mug you bring up a ruddy miracle who backs every

wrong 'un at a hundred to one—and romps in. And thinking you straight, Mr. Billiter, sir, I've stretched out the odds—to oblige you. And you've damn well landed me. It's getting monotonous. See? I'm tired."

"It's not my fault, Joe," said Billiter humbly. "Look. Just an extra fiver on Punchinello. He's got no earthly—you know that as well as I do."

"Do I?" growled the bookmaker angrily, convinced that Billiter was over-reaching him. "How do I know what you know? You want to have it both ways, do you? Well, you won't get it out of me."

"I swear to God, Joe," said Billiter earnestly, "that I'm straight. So little did I expect him to win that I've not asked a penny commission."

"Then ask it now, and be hanged to you," cried the angry bookmaker, and leaping back to his stool, he resumed his brazen-throated trade.

Billiter kept his five-pound note, unwilling to risk it with another bookmaker on the laughing-stock of a Punchinello, and sauntered away moodily. He was a most injured man. Old Joe Jenks doubted his good faith. Now, was there a single horse selected for his patron to back upon which any student of racing outside a lunatic asylum would have staked money? Not one. He could lay his hand on his honest heart and swear it. And had he staked a penny on his selections? No. He could swear to that, too. He had not (fool that he was) asked Quixtus for a commission. Through his honourable dealing he was a poor man. The thought was bitter. He had run straight with Jenks. It was not his fault if the devil had got into the horses so that every shocking outsider backed by Quixtus revealed ultra-equine capacities. What could a horse do against the superhorse? Nothing. What could Billiter himself do? Nothing. Except have a

drink. In the circumstances it was the only thing to do. He went into the bar of the grand stand and ordered a whisky and soda. It sizzled gratefully down a throat burning with a sense of wrong. His moral tone restored, he determined to live in poverty no more for the sake of a quixotic principle, and, proceeding to a ready-money bookmaker of his acquaintance, pulled out his five-pound note, and backed Rosemary, a certain winner (such was his private and infallible information) at eight to one. This duty to himself accomplished, he went to the grand stand to view the race, leaving Quixtus to do that which seemed best to him.

The bell rang, the course was cleared, the numbers put up; the horses cantered gaily past. At the sight of Rosemary, a shiny bay in beautiful condition, Billiter's heart warmed; at the sight of Punchinello, a scraggy crock who had never won a race in his inglorious life, Billiter sniffed scornfully. If Old Joe Jenks was such a fool as to refuse a free gift of two pounds ten—they had agreed to halve the spoils—the folly thereof lay entirely on Old Joe Jenks's head.

The start was made. For a long time the horses ran in a bunch. Then Rosemary crept ahead. Billiter's moustache beneath the levelled field-glasses betrayed a happy smile. Rosemary increased her lead. At the turn into the straight, something happened. She swerved and lost her stride. Three others dashed by, among them the despised Punchinello. They passed the post in a flash, Punchinello first. Billiter murmured things at which the world, had it heard them, would have grown pale, and again sought the bar. Emerging thence he went in quest of his patron. He had not far to go. Quixtus sat on a wooden chair at the back of the grand stand reading a vellum covered *Elzevir* duodecimo edition of Saint Augustine's

Confessions. When Billiter approached he rose and thrust the volume into the tail pocket of his frock-coat.

"Was that a race?" he asked.

"Race. Of course it was. *The* race. Didn't you see it?"

"Thank goodness, no," said Quixtus. "Did any horse win?"

The sodden and simple wit of Billiter rose like a salmon at this gaudy fly of irony. He lost his temper.

"Your damned, spavined, bow-legged, mule-begotten crock of a Punchinello won."

Quixtus regarded him mildly; but a transient gleam of light flickered in his china-blue eyes.

"Then, my dear Billiter," said he, "I have won nine hundred pounds, which, in view of my opinion of the turf, based on experience, I think I shall hand over to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to be earmarked for the conversion of the Mahommedans in Mecca. As for you, Billiter, you have won two hundred and twenty-five pounds"—Billiter quivered with sub-aspirate anathema—"which ought to satisfy the momentary cupidity of any man. Let us go. The more I see of it the more am I convinced that the race-course is no place for me. It is too good."

Billiter glanced at him with wrathful suspicion. Was he speaking in childish simplicity or in mordant sarcasm? The grave, unsmiling face, the expressionless blue eyes gave him no clue.

Thus, however, ended Quixtus's career on the Turf. To stand about wearily in all weathers in order to witness what, to his fastidious mind was merely a dull and vulgar spectacle, was an act of self-sacrifice from which he derived no compensating thrill. The injured Billiter having patched up a peace with Old Joe Jenks, convincing him of his own ingenuousness and of the

inevitable change in his patron's luck, in vain persuaded Quixtus to resume his investigations. He offered to introduce him to a fraternity of so-called commission agents and touts, in whose company he could saturate himself with vileness.

"I have no taste for disgusting society," said Quixtus.

"Then I don't know what the deuce you do want," exclaimed Billiter in a fume.

"You can't touch pitch without being defiled."

"I thought that was just what you were trying to be."

"In one way, yes," replied Quixtus, musingly; "but I loathe touching the pitch."

In spite of his confessed belief in the altruistic purity of the turf, he regarded as unspeakable defilement the cheques which he had received from Old Joe Jenks. He had kept them in his drawer, and the more he looked at them the more did the bestial face of Old Joe Jenks obtrude itself before his eyes, and the more repugnant did it become to his now abnormal fastidiousness to pay them into his own banking account. To destroy them, as was his first impulse, merely signified a benefit conferred on the odious Jenks, who would be only too glad to repocket his filthy money. What should he do? At last a malignant idea occurred to his morbidly and curiously working mind. He would cast all this pitch and defilement upon another's head. Some one else should shiver with the disgust of it. But who? The inspiration came from Tartarus. He endorsed the cheques to the value of nearly two thousand pounds, and paid them into the banking account of his nephew, Tommy Burgrave.

He would be as diabolically and defiledly wicked as you please, but the intermediary pitch he would not touch.

That was his attitude towards all the suggestions for wickedness laid before him by his three counsellors. They, for their part, although they recognised great advantage in fostering the gloomy humour of their mad patron, began to be weary in evil-doing. After they had taxed their invention for an attractive scheme of villainy, they found that it either came within the tabooed category of crime or, by its lack of refinement, failed to commend itself to the sensitive scholar. They were at their wits' end. The only one to whose proposal Quixtus turned an attentive ear was Huckaby, who had suggested the heart-breaking expedition through the fashionable resorts of Europe. And, to the credit of Huckaby, be it here mentioned that, beyond certain fantastical and mocking suggestions, such as the devastation of old women's wards in workhouses by means of an anonymous Christmas gift of nitroglycerine plum-puddings, this was the only serious proposal he submitted. Anxious, however, lest the idea should lose its attraction, he urged Quixtus to start immediately. It is not every day that a down-at-heel wastrel has the opportunity of luxurious foreign travel, to say nothing of the humorous object of this particular excursion. But Quixtus, very sensibly, pointed out to his eager follower that the fashionable resorts of Europe, save the great capitals, are empty during the months of May and June, and that it would be much better to postpone their journey until August filled them with the thousand women waiting to have their hearts broken.

Vandermeer, unemployed since his embassy to Tommy Burgrave, unsuccessful in his suggestions and envious of Billiter and Huckaby, at last hit upon an ingenious idea. He brought Quixtus a dirty letter. It ran:

"DEAR MR. VANDERMEER: You, who were an old friend of my husband's in our better days and know how valiantly I have struggled to keep the home together, can't you help me now? I am ill in bed, my children are starving. The little ones are lying now even too weak to cry out for bread. It would break a wolf's heart to see them. If you can't help me, for I know how things are with you, can't you bring my case before your rich friend, Mr. Quixtus, of whose kindness and generosity you have so often spoken? . . .

"Yours sincerely,

"EMILY WELLGOOD."

It bore the address "2 Transiter Street, Clerkenwell Road, N.W."

"What do you bring me this for?" asked Quixtus as soon as he had read it.

"I am satisfying my own conscience as far as Mrs. Wellgood is concerned," replied Vandermeer, "and at the same time giving you an opportunity of being wicked. It's a genuine case. You can let them die of starvation."

Quixtus leaned back in his chair and gave the matter his consideration. Vandermeer had interrupted him in the midst of a paper which he was writing to controvert a new theory as to the juxtaposition of the palæolithic and neolithic tombs at Solutré, and he required time to fetch back his mind from the quaternary age to the present day. The prospect of a whole family perishing of hunger by an act, as it were, of his will, pleased his fancy.

"Very good. Very good, Vandermeer. Let them starve," said he. "Let them starve," he murmured to himself as he took up his pen.

Vandermeer, hanging about, hinted at payment for

the service rendered. Quixtus met his crafty eyes with equal cunning.

"You would be too soft hearted—you would give them some of the money. Wait till some of them are dead." He rolled the last words delectably round his tongue. "And now, my dear Vandermeer, I'm very busy. Many thanks and good-bye."

Vandermeer left reluctantly and Quixtus resumed his work.

"The bizygomatic transverse diameter," he wrote, putting down the beginning of the sentence that was in his head when Vandermeer was announced. He paused. He had lost the thread of his ideas. It was a subtle argument depending on the comparative measurements of newly discovered skulls. He threw down his pen impatiently, and in mild and gentlemanly language anathematised Vandermeer. He attacked the bizygomatic transverse diameter again; but the starving family occupied his thoughts. Presently he abandoned work for the morning and gave himself up to the relish of his wickedness. It had a delicious flavour. Practically he was slaying mother and babes, while he stood outside the ordinary repulsive and sordid circumstances of murder. Vandermeer should have his reward. After lunch, he felt impelled to visit them. A force stronger than a strong inclination to return to his paper led him out of the front door and into a taxi-cab summoned from the neighbouring rank. He promised himself the thrill of gloating over the sufferings of his victims. Besides, the letter contained a challenge. "It would break a wolf's heart to see them." He would show the writer that his heart was harder than any wolf's. Instinctively his hand sought the waistcoat pocket in which he kept his loose gold. Yes; there were three sovereigns. He smiled. It would be the finished craft of devildom to lay them

out on a table before the woman's hungering and ravished eyes and then, with a merciless chuckle, to pocket them again and walk out of the house.

"I will *not* be a fool," he asserted, as the taxi-cab entered the Clerkenwell Road.

The taxi-cab driver signed that he wished to communicate with his fare. Quixtus leaned forward over the door.

"Do you know where Transiter Street is, Sir?"

Quixtus did not. Does any easy London gentleman know the mean streets in the purlieus of Clerkenwell? But, oddly enough, a milkman of the locality knew not Transiter Street, either. Nor did a policeman on duty. Nor did a postman. Perplexed, Quixtus drove to the nearest District Post Office and made enquiries. There was no such street in Clerkenwell at all. He consulted the Post Office London Directory. There was no such street as Transiter Street in London.

Quixtus drove home in an angry mood. Once more he had been deceived. Vandermeer had invented the emaciated family for the sake of the fee. Did the earth hold a more abandoned villain? He grimly set about devising some punishment for his disingenuous counsellor. Nothing adequate occurred to him till some days afterwards when Vandermeer sent him another forged letter announcing the demise, in horrible torment, of the youngest child. He took up his pen and wrote as follows:

"My Dear Vandermeer: I am sending Mrs. Wellgood the burial expenses. I have also enclosed a cheque for yourself. Will you kindly go to Transiter Street and claim it? For the present I have no further need of you.

"Yours sincerely,

"Ephraim Quixtus."

He posted the letter himself on his way to lunch at the club, where Wonnacott remarked on his high good humour.

Since the discontinuance of the Tuesday dinners (for they were not resumed after the establishment of the new relations), Huckaby, Billiter, and Vandermeer had contracted the habit of meeting once a week in the bar-parlour of a quiet tavern for a companionable fuddle. There they exchanged views on religion and alcohol, and related unveracious (and uncredited) anecdotes of their former high estate. Jealous of each other, however, they spoke little of Quixtus, and then only in general terms. The poor gentleman was still distraught. It was a sad case, causing them to wag their heads sorrowfully and order another round of whisky.

But one evening of depression, Quixtus having for some time refused their ministrations, and pockets having become woefully empty, they talked with greater freedom of their respective dealings with their patron. Vandermeer related the practical joke he had played upon him; Billiter described his astounding luck, and his crazy reason for retiring from the turf; and Huckaby, by way of illustrating the unbalanced state of Quixtus's mind, confided to them the project of breaking a woman's heart.

"What are you going to get out of it?" asked Vandermeer brutally, for the first time breaking through the pretence that they were three devoted friends banded together to protect the poor mad gentleman's interests.

Huckaby raised a protesting hand. "My dear Van!"

"Oh, drop it," cried Vandermeer. "You make me tired." He repeated the question.

"Simply amusement. What else?" said Huckaby.

They wrangled foolishly for a while. At last Billiter, who had remained silent, brought his fist down, with a bang, on the table.

"I've got an idea," said he. "Have you any particular woman in view?"

"Lord, no," said Huckaby.

"I can put you on to one," said Billiter. "No need to go abroad. She's here in London."

Huckaby called him uncomplimentary names. The Continental trip, as far as he was concerned, was the essence of the suggestion; the capture of the wild goose a remote consideration.

"Besides, old man," said he, "this is my show."

Billiter looked glum. After all, the idea was of no great value. Vandermeer's cunning brain began to work. He asked Billiter for a description of the lady.

"She's the widow of an old pal of mine," replied Billiter. "Lady and all that sort of thing. Her husband, poor old chap, came to grief—Dragoon Guards—in the running for a title—went it too hot, you know—died leaving her with nothing at all. She has pulled through, somehow—lives in devilish good style, dresses expensively, and has the cleverness to hang on to her social position. Damned nice woman—but as for her heart, you could go at it with a pickaxe without risk of breaking it. I thought she would just suit the case."

"Where does the money come from to live in good style and dress expensively?" asked Huckaby.

"Billiter thinks it might just as well come from Quixtus as from any one else. Don't you, Billiter?"

Billiter nodded sagaciously and gulped down some whisky and water.

"And then we'd all stand in," cried Vandermeer.

"That may be all very well in its way," said Huck-

aby, "but I'm not going to give up my one chance of getting abroad."

"Go abroad then," retorted Vandermeer. "If the lady is of the kind I take her to be, she won't mind crossing the Channel when she knows there's a golden feathered coot in Boulogne just dying to moult in her hand."

"You are crude and vulgar in your ideas, Van," said Huckaby. "Gentlemen of Quixtus's position no more go to Boulogne for a holiday than they frequent Ramsgate boarding-houses. And they don't give large sums of money to expensively dressed ladies with conjecturable means of support."

"He's such a fool that he would never guess anything," argued Vandermeer.

"Hold on," said Billiter, "you're on the wrong tack altogether. I told you she was a lady." His manner changed subtly, the moribund instinct of birth crackling suddenly into a tiny flame. "I don't know if you two quite realise what that means, but to Quixtus it would mean everything."

"I'm a sometime Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge——" began Huckaby, ruffled.

"Then you must have met a lady connected with somebody in your damned Academy," said Billiter, who had been sent down from Oxford.

"The University of Cambridge isn't an Academy," said Huckaby, waxing quarrelsome.

"And a woman who subsists on gifts from her gentlemen friends can't be a real lady," said Vandermeer.

"Oh, go to blazes, both of you!" cried Billiter angrily.

He clapped on his hat and rose. But as he had been sitting in the corner of the divan, between Huckaby and Vandermeer, with the table in front of him, a dig-

nified exit was impracticable. Indeed, he was immediately plumped down again on his seat by a tug on each side of his coat, and adjured in the vernacular not to stray from the paths of wisdom.

"What's the use of quarrelling?" asked Huckaby. "She's a lady if you say so."

"Of course, old man," Vandermeer agreed. "Have a drink?"

Billiter being mollified, and the refinement of the Dragoon Guardsman's widow being accepted as indisputable, a long and confidential conference took place, the conspirators speaking in whispers, with heads close together, although they happened to be alone in the saloon-bar. It was the first time they had contemplated concerted action, the first time they had discussed anything of real interest; so, for the first time they forgot to get fuddled. The plot was simple. Billiter was to approach Mrs. Fontaine (at last he disclosed the lady's identity) with all the delicacy such a mission demanded, and lay the proposal before her. If she fell in with it she would hold herself in readiness to repair to whatever Continental resort might be indicated, and then having made herself known to Huckaby, would be introduced by him to Quixtus. The rest would follow, as the night the day.

"The part I don't like about it," objected Vandermeer, "is not only letting a fourth into our own private concern, but giving her the lion's share. We're not a syndicate of philanthropists."

"I'm by way of thinking it won't be our concern much longer," replied Billiter.

"And nobody asked you to come in," said Huckaby. "You can stand out if you like."

An ugly look overspread Vandermeer's foxy face.

"Oh, can I? You see what happens if you try that game on."

"Besides," continued Billiter, disregarding the snarl, "it will be to our advantage. Which of us is going to touch our demented friend for a hundred pounds? We didn't do it in former days; much less now. But I'll back Mrs. Fontaine to get at least three thousand out of him. Thirty per cent. is our commission, without which we don't play, and that gives us three hundred each. I could do with three hundred myself very nicely."

"How are we to know what she gets?"

"That's easily managed," said Huckaby, pulling his ragged beard. "She'll make her returns to Billiter and I'll undertake to get the figures out of Quixtus."

"But where do I come in?" asked Vandermeer. "How shall I know if you two are playing straight?"

"You'll have your damned head punched in a minute," said Billiter, looking fierce. "To hear you one would think we were a set of crooks."

"If we aren't, what the devil are we, then?" muttered Vandermeer bitterly.

But Billiter had turned his broad back on him and did not catch the words, whereby possibly he escaped a broken head. Billiter was sometimes sensitive on the point of honour. He had sunk to lower depths of meanness and petty villainy than the other two in whom the moral sense still lingered. He would acknowledge himself to be a "wrong 'un" because that vague term connoted in his mind merely a gentleman of broken fortune who was put to shifts (such as his disastrous bargain with Old Joe Jenks and the present conspiracy) for his living; but a crook was a common thief or swindler, a member of the criminal classes, of a confraternity to which he, Billiter, deemed it impossible that he could belong, especially during a period like the present, when he found himself, after

many years of dingy linen, apparelled in the gorgeous raiment of his gentlemanly days. He had sunk below the line of self-realisation. But the others had not. Vandermeer, who hitherto had merely snapped like a jackal at passing food to satisfy his hunger, did not deceive himself as to what he had become. Cynical, he felt no remorse. On the other hand, Huckaby, who went to bed that night sober, had a bad attack of conscience during the small hours and woke up next morning with a headache. Whereupon he upbraided himself for his folly; first, in confiding to his companions the project of his whimsical adventure; secondly, in allowing it to drift into such a despicable entanglement; thirdly, in associating himself with a scarlet crustacean of Billiter's claw-power; and fourthly, in not getting drunk.

Huckaby was nearer Quixtus than the others in education and point of view. Though willing to accept any alms thrown to him he was not rapacious; he had not regarded his mad and wealthy patron entirely as a pigeon to be plucked; and beneath all the corruption of his nature there burnt a spark of affection for the kindly man who had befriended him and whose trust he had betrayed. He spent most of the ineffectual day in shaping a resolution to withdraw from the discreditable compact. But by the last post in the evening he received a laconic postcard from Billiter: "*The Fountain plays.*"

The sapped will-power gave way before the march of practical events. With a shrug he accepted the message as a decree of destiny, and wandered forth into congenial haunts, where, in one respect at least, he did not repeat the folly of the previous evening.

CHAPTER XIII

NOT long after this Quixtus announced to Huckaby his intention of going to Paris to attend a small Congress of the Anthropological Societies of the North-West of France, to which he, as president of the Anthropological Society of London, had been invited. He had gradually, in spite of his preoccupation, resumed his interest in his favourite pursuit, and, though he knew his learned friends to be villains at heart, he enjoyed their learned and even their lighter conversation. Human society had begun to attract him again. It afforded him saturnine amusement to speculate on the corruption that lay hidden beneath the fair exterior of men and women. He also had a half-crazy pleasure in wearing the mask himself. When he smiled in his grave and benevolent manner on the woman by his side at the dinner-table, how could she suspect the malignant ferocity of his nature? He was playing a part. He was fooling her to the top of her bent. She went away with the impression that she had been talking to a mild, scholarly gentleman of philanthropic tendencies. She possibly asked the monster to tea. He hugged himself with delight. When it was a question, however, of identifying remains of aurochs and mammoths and reindeer, or establishing the date of a flint hatchet, he took the matter seriously and gave it his profound attention. A palæolithic carving of a cave lion on mammoth ivory recently discovered in the Seine-et-Oise was to be exhibited at the Congress and form the subject of a

paper. As soon as he heard this he accepted the invitation with enthusiasm. The carving was supposed to be the most perfect of its kind yet discovered, and Quixtus burned to behold it.

Huckaby, whose financial affairs were in the saddest condition and who had called with the vague hope of a trifle on account of services to be rendered, pricked up his ears at the announcement. Even though the main heart-breaking quest was deferred to August, why should they not seek a minor adventure during Quixtus's visit to Paris? It would be a kind of trial trip. At the suggestion Quixtus shook his head. The Congress would occupy all his time and attention.

"Quite so," said Huckaby. "While you're busy with prehistoric man, I'll be hunting down modern woman. By the time I've found her, you'll have finished. Having done with the bones, you can devote a few extra days to the flesh."

Quixtus winced. "That's rather an unfortunate way of putting it."

"To the spirit then—the Evil Spirit," said Huckaby unabashed. "That is, if we discover a subject. We're bound to try various experiments before we finally succeed."

"I'm afraid it will be more trouble than the thing is worth," said Quixtus musingly.

Here was something happening which Huckaby dreaded. Quixtus was beginning to lose interest in the adventure. In another month he might regard it with repugnance. He must start it now with Mrs. Fontaine in Paris, or the whole conspiracy must collapse. The thought urged Huckaby to fresh efforts of persuasion.

"Revenge is sweet and worth the trouble," he said at last.

"Yes," replied Quixtus in a low voice. "Revenge would be sweet."

Huckaby glanced at him swiftly. Beyond the iniquity of Marrable, he was ignorant of the precise nature of the injuries which Quixtus had sustained at the hands of fortune. Was it possible that a woman had played him false? But what had this fossil of a man to do with women?

"I, too," said he, with malicious intent, "would like to pay off old scores against a faithless sex. You have found them faithless, haven't you?"

Quixtus's brow darkened. "As false as hell," said he.

"I knew a woman had treated you shamefully," said Huckaby, after a pause during which Quixtus had fallen into a dull reverie.

"Infamously," replied Quixtus, below his breath. He looked away into the distance, madness gathering in his eyes. For the moment he seemed to forget the other's presence. Huckaby took his opportunity. He said in a whisper:

"She betrayed you?"

Quixtus nodded. Huckaby watched him narrowly, an absurd suspicion beginning to form itself in his mind. By his chance phrase about revenge he had put his friend's unsound mind on the track of a haunting tragedy. Who was the woman? His wife? But she had died beloved of him, and for years, until this madness overtook him, he had spoken of her with the reverence due to a departed saint. It was a puzzle; the solution peculiarly interesting. How should he obtain it? Quixtus was not the man to blab his intimate secrets into the ear of his hired bravo—for as such he knew that Quixtus regarded him. It behooved him not to change the minor key of this conversation.

"A man's foes," he quoted in a murmur, "are even of his own household."

Quixtus nodded again three or four times, with parted lips.

"His own household. Those dearest to him. The woman he loved and his best friend."

In spite of his suspicion, Huckaby was astounded at the inadvertent confession. In his last days of grace he had known Mrs. Quixtus and the best friend. Swiftly his mind went back. He remembered vaguely their familiar intercourse. What was the man's name? He groped and found it.

"Hammersley," he said aloud.

At the word, Quixtus started to his feet and swept his hand over his face.

"What are you talking about? What do you know against Hammersley?"

A lurid ray shot athwart his darkened mind. He realised the betrayal of his most jealously guarded secret to Huckaby. He shrank back, growing hot and cold through shame.

"Hammersley played me false over some money affairs," he said cunningly. "It's a black business which I will tell you about one of these days."

"And the woman?" asked Huckaby.

"The woman—she—she married. I am glad to say she's giving her husband a devil of a time."

He laughed nervously. Huckaby, with surprising tact, followed on the wrong scent like a puppy.

"You can avenge the poor fellow and yourself at the same time," said he. "Women are all alike. It's right that one of them should be made to suffer. You have it in your power to make one of them suffer the tortures of hell."

"Yes, yes, I'll do it," cried Quixtus.

"No time like the present."

"You're right," said Quixtus. "We'll go to Paris together."

For the first few days in Paris Quixtus had little time to devote to the secondary object of his visit. The meetings and excursions of the Congress absorbed his attention. His Parisian confrères took him to their homes and exhibited their collections of flint instruments, their wives and their daughters. He attended intimate dinners, the words *sans cérémonie* being underlined in the invitation, where all the men, who had worn evening dress in the morning at a formal function of the Congress, assembled in the salon gravely attired in tightly-buttoned frock-coats and wearing dogskin gloves which they only took off when they sat down to table. His good provincial colleagues, who thought they might just as well hear the chimes at midnight while they were in Paris as not, insisted on his accompanying them in their mild dissipation. This generally consisted in drinking beer at a brasserie filled with parti-coloured ladies and talking palæolithic gossip amid the bewildering uproar of a Tzigane band. Now and again Huckaby, who assured him that he was prosecuting his researches in the fauna of the Hôtel Continental, where, on Huckaby's advice, they were staying, would accompany him on such adventures.

Curiously enough, Quixtus had begun to like the man again. Admitted on a social equality and dressed in reputable garments, Huckaby began to lose the assertiveness of manner mingled with furtive flattery which of late had characterised him. He began to assume an air of self-respect, even of good-breeding. Quixtus noticed with interest the change wrought in him by clothes and environment, and contrasted him favourably with Billiter, whom new and gorgeous raiment had rendered peculiarly offensive. There were times when he could forget the sorry mission which Huckaby had undertaken, and find pleasure in his con-

versation. Scrupulous sobriety aided the temporary metamorphosis. As he spoke French passably and had retained a considerable amount of scholarship, Quixtus (to his astonishment) found that he could introduce him with a certain pride to his brother anthropologists, as one who would cast no discredit on his country. Huckaby was quick to perceive his patron's change of attitude, and took pains to maintain it. The novelty, too, of mingling again with clean-living, intellectual and kindly men afforded him a keen pleasure which was worth a week's abstinence from whisky. Whether it was worth a whole life of respectability and endeavour was another matter. The present sufficed him.

He played the scholarly gentleman so well that Quixtus was not surprised, one afternoon, when passing through the great lounge of the Continental, to see a lady rise from a tea-table and greet his companion in the friendliest manner.

"Eustace Huckaby, can that possibly be you—or is it your ghost?"

Huckaby bowed over the proffered hand. "What an unexpected delight."

"It's years and years since we met. How many?"

"I daren't count them, for both our sakes," said Huckaby.

"Why have you dropped out of my horizon for all this time?" asked the lady.

"*Mea maxima culpa.*" He smiled, bowed in the best-bred way in the world, and half turned so as to bring Quixtus into the group. "May I introduce my friend, Dr. Quixtus? Mrs. Fontaine."

The lady smiled sweetly. "You are Dr. Quixtus, the anthropologist?"

"I am interested in the subject," said Quixtus.

"More than that. I have read your book: *The Household Arts of the Neolithic Age.*"

"An indiscretion of youth," said Quixtus.

"Oh, please don't tell me it's all wrong," cried Mrs. Fontaine in alarm. "I'm always quoting it. It forms part of my little stock-in-trade of learning."

"Oh, no. It's not exactly incorrect," said Quixtus, with a smile, pleased that so pretty a lady should count among his disciples, "but it's superficial. So much has been discovered since I wrote it."

"But it's a standard work, all the same. I happened to see an account of the Anthropological Congress in the paper this morning, in which you are referred to as the *éminent anthropologue anglais* and the author of my book. I was so pleased. I should have been more so had I known I was to meet you this afternoon. Have you turned anthropologist, too, Mr. Huckaby?"

Huckaby explained that he was taking advantage of the Congress to make holiday in the company of his distinguished friend. That was the first afternoon the Congress had allowed him leisure, and they had devoted it to contemplation of the acres of fresh paint in the Grand Palais. They had come home exhausted.

"Home? Then you're staying in the hotel?"

"Yes," said Huckaby. "And you?"

"I, too. And in its vastness I feel the most lonesome widow woman that ever was. I'm waiting here for Lady Louisa Malling, who promised to join me; but I think something must have happened, for there is no sign of her."

A waiter brought the tray with tea which she had ordered before the men's entrance, and set it on the basket table. Mrs. Fontaine motioned to it.

"Won't you share my solitude and join me?"

"With pleasure," said Huckaby.

Quixtus accepted the invitation, and with his grave courtesy withdrew a chair to make a passage for Mrs. Fontaine, who gave the additional order to the waiter. The lounge and the courtyard were thronged with a well-dressed cosmopolitan crowd, tea-drinking, smoking, and chattering. A band discoursed discreet music at a convenient distance. The scene was cool to eyes tired by the vivid colours of the salon and the hot streets. Quixtus sat down restfully by the side of his hostess and let her minister to his wants. He was surprised to find how pleasant a change was the company of a soft-voiced and attractive woman after that of his somewhat ponderous and none too picturesque confrères. She was good to look upon, an English blonde in a pale lilac dress and hat—the incarnation of early summer; not beautiful, but pleasing; at the same time simple and exquisite. The arrangement of her blonde hair, the fine oval contour of her face, the thin, delicate lips, gave her an air of chastity which was curiously belied by dark grey eyes dreaming behind long lashes. All her movements, supple and natural, spoke of breeding; unmistakably a lady. Evidently a friend of Huckaby's before his fall. Quixtus wondered cynically whether she would have greeted with such frank gladness the bloodshot-eyed scarecrow of a fortnight before. From their talk, he concluded that she had no idea of the man's degradation.

"Mr. Huckaby and I knew each other when the world was young," she said. "Centuries ago—in the palæolithic age—before my marriage."

"Alas!" said Huckaby, sipping the unaccustomed tea. "You threw aside the injunction: *arma cedant togæ*. In our case it was the gown that had to yield to the arms. You married a soldier."

She sighed and looked down pensively at her wed-

ding-ring. Then she glanced up with a laugh, and handed Quixtus the bread and butter.

"Believe me, Dr. Quixtus, this is the first time I ever heard of the rivalry. He only invented it for the sake of the epigram. Isn't that true?"

"In one way," replied Huckaby. "I was so insignificant that you never even noticed it."

She laughed again and turned to Quixtus.

"How long are you going to stay in Paris?"

"Just a day or two longer—till the end of my Congress."

"Oh! How can you leave Paris when she's looking her best without devoting a few days to admiring her? It's unkind."

"I'm afraid Paris must get over the slight."

"But don't you love Paris? I do. It is so fascinating, dangerous, treacherous. Plunge into it for a moment or two and it is the Fountain of Youth. Remain in the water a little longer than is prudent, and you come out shrivelled and wrinkled, with all your youth and beauty gone from you."

"Perhaps I have already had my prudent plunge," said Quixtus with a smile.

"I'm sure you haven't. You've been on dry land all the time. Worse than that—in a quaternary formation. Have you dined at Armenonville?"

"In my time I have; but not this time."

"*Voilà,*" said Mrs. Fontaine. "The warm June nights, the Bois in the moonlight with all its mysteries of shadow, the fairy palace in the midst of it where you eat fairy things surrounded by the gaiety and sparkle and laughter of the world—essential and symbolical Paris—you disregard it all. And that is only one little instance. There are a thousand others. You've not even wetted your feet."

She embroidered her thesis very gracefully, clothing

the woman of the world in a diaphanous robe of pretty fancy, revealing a mind ever so little baffling, here material, there imaginative—a mind as contradictory as her face, with its chaste contours and its alluring eyes. Quixtus listened to her with amused interest. She represented a type with which he, accustomed to the less vivid womenfolk of the learned, was unfamiliar. Without leaving Huckaby, her girlhood's friend, out in the cold, she made it delicately evident that, of the two, Quixtus was the more worthy of attention on account of his attainments and the more attractive in his personality. Quixtus, flattered, thought her a woman of great discernment.

"But you," said he at last. "Have you made your plunge—not that you need it—into the Fountain of Youth? Have you fed on the honeydew of the Bois de Boulogne and drunk the milk of Armenonville?"

"I only arrived last night," she explained. "And I must remain more or less in quarantine, being an unprotected woman, till my friend Lady Louisa Malling comes, or till my friends in Paris get to know I am here. But I always like a day or two of freedom before announcing myself—so that I can do the foolish things that Parisians would jeer at. I always go to the Louvre and look at the little laughing Faun and the Giaconda, and I always go down the Seine in a steamboat, and from the Madeleine to the Bastille on the top of an omnibus. Then I'm ready for my plunge."

"I should have thought that bath of innocence was in itself the Fountain of Youth," said Huckaby.

The least suspicion of a frown passed over Mrs. Fontaine's candid brow, but she replied with a smile:

"On the contrary, my friend, that is a penitential dipping in the waters of the past."

"Why penitential?" asked Quixtus.

"Isn't it wholesome discipline to give oneself pain sometimes?" Her face grew wistful. "To revisit scenes where one has been happy—and sharpen the knife of memory?"

"It is the instinct of the ascetic," smiled Quixtus.

"I suppose I have a bit of it," she replied demurely. Then her face brightened. "I don't wear a hair shirt—I've got to appear in an evening gown sometimes—but I find an odd little satisfaction in doing penance. If I were a Roman Catholic I would embarrass my confessor."

Huckaby's lips twitched in a smile beneath his moustache. If all the tales that Billiter told of Lena Fontaine were true, a confessor would be exceedingly embarrassed. He regarded her with admiration. She was an entirely different woman from the hard and contemptuous partner in iniquity to whom Billiter had introduced him before he left London. It had not been a pleasant interview—just the details of their Paris meeting arranged, the story of their past acquaintance rehearsed, and nothing more. Huckaby, descending her stairs with Billiter, had felt as if he had been whipped, and prophesied failure. She was not the woman for Quixtus. But Billiter grinned and bade him wait. He had waited, and now had the satisfaction of seeing Quixtus caught immediately in the gossamer web of her charm. He wondered, too, how she could have maintained her relations with so undesirable a person as Billiter, for whom he himself entertained a profound contempt. Billiter was unusually silent on the matter, letting it be vaguely understood that he had been in the Dragoon Guardsman's set before running through his money, and that he had accidentally done her a service in later years. What that service was he declined to mention. Huckaby sniffed

blackmail. That was the more likely influence keeping together a well-received woman of hidden life and a shabby and unpresentable sot like Billiter. He remembered that Billiter had confessed to a mysterious source of income. What more natural an explanation thereof than the fact that, having once surprised a woman's secret and holding her reputation in his hands, he should have been accepted by her, in desperation, as her paid doer of unavowable offices? He knew that a woman of Lena Fontaine's type, with an assured social position in the great world, does not descend into the half-world without a desperate struggle. Her back is against the wall, and she uses any weapon to hand. Hence her use of Billiter. At all events, in the present case there had been no pretence of friendship. To her it had obviously been a hateful matter of business, which she had been anxious to conclude as soon as possible. One condition she rigorously exacted: that her acquaintance with Billiter should not be revealed to Quixtus. She was not proud of Billiter. Huckaby took what comfort he could from the thought.

Mrs. Fontaine sat talking to the two men until the tea-drinking and chattering crowd had melted away. Then she rose, thanked them prettily for wasting their science-filled time on an irresponsible woman's loneliness, and expressed to Huckaby the hope that she would see him again before he left Paris.

"I trust I, too, may have the pleasure," said Quixtus.

"You might lead us to the Fountain of Youth one of these evenings," said Huckaby.

"It would be delightful," said the lady, with a questioning glance at Quixtus.

"I could dream of nothing more pleasant," he replied, bowing in his old-fashioned way.

When she had gone, the men resumed their seats. Quixtus lit a cigarette.

"A very charming woman."

Huckaby agreed. "It has been one of my great regrets of the past few years that I have not been able to keep up our old friendship. We moved in different worlds." He paused, as if thinking sorrowfully of his misspent life. "I hope you don't mind my suggesting the little dinner-party," he said after a while. "My position was a delicate one."

"It was a very good idea," said Quixtus.

Huckaby said little more, preferring to leave well alone. The plot, up to this point, had succeeded. Quixtus gave complete credence to the story, unsuspecting that Mrs. Fontaine was the woman selected for his heart-breaking experiment, and already considerably attracted by her personality. Diabolical possibilities could be insinuated later. In the meanwhile, Huckaby had played his part. Future success now lay in Mrs. Fontaine's hands.

Quixtus dined that evening with one of his colleagues, and Huckaby, after a meal at a restaurant, went to the Comédie Française and sat through *Phèdre* from beginning to end, with great enjoyment. The re-awakening of his æsthetic sense, dulled for so many years, surprised and gratified him.

When he met his patron the next morning he said abruptly:

"If I had a chance of getting back again I'd take it."

"Getting back where?" asked Quixtus. "To London?"

Huckaby explained. "I'm tired of running crooked," he added. "If I could only get regular work to bring me in a few pounds a week, I'd run straight and sober for the rest of my life."

"I don't think I can help you to attain your wishes, my dear Huckaby," replied Quixtus reflectively. "If I did, I should be committing a good action, which, as you know, is entirely against my principles."

"I don't yearn so much after goodness," said Huckaby, "as after decency and cleanliness. I've no ambition to die a white-haired saint."

"All white-haired saints are white sepulchres," said Quixtus.

In spite of regenerative impulses, Huckaby persuaded his patron to lunch at the hotel where he knew that Mrs. Fontaine and the newly arrived Lady Louisa Malling had planned to lunch also. The establishment of informal relations was important. They entered the table d'hôte room, and, preceded by the maître d'hôtel, marched to the table reserved for them. About six tables away sat Mrs. Fontaine and her friend. She smiled a pleasant greeting.

"Women can sometimes be exceedingly decorative," remarked Quixtus, helping himself to sardines.

"If they are not, they leave unfulfilled one of the main functions of their existence."

"Did you ever know a good woman?"

"Mrs. Fontaine is one of the best I've ever known," replied Huckaby at a venture.

The heart-breaking could be practised on a sweet and virtuous flower of a woman with much more villainous success than on a hardened coquette.

Quixtus said nothing. His natural delicacy forbade the discussion of a specific woman's moral attributes.

The occupants of the two tables met after lunch in the lounge, and had coffee and cigarettes together. The men were presented to Lady Louisa Malling, an aimless, dowdy woman of forty, running to fat. As far as could be gathered from her conversation, her two interests in life were Lena Fontaine and food in

restaurants. In Mrs. Fontaine's presence she spoke chiefly of the latter. When Mrs. Fontaine went up to her room for a forgotten powder-puff, leaving her with the men, she plunged with animation into eulogy of Mrs. Fontaine's virtues. In this she was sincere. She believed in Mrs. Fontaine's virtues, which, like the costermonger's giant strawberries, lay ostentatiously at the top of her basket of qualities; and she was so stupid that her friend could always dissimulate from her incurious eyes the crushed and festering fruit below.

"I always think it so sad for a sweet, beautiful woman like Lena to be alone in the world," said Lady Louisa in a soft, even voice. "But she's so brave, so cheerful, so gentle."

"It's a wonder she hasn't married again," said Huckaby.

"I don't think she ever will," replied Lady Louisa, "unless she gets a man to understand her. And where is he to be found?"

"Ah, where?" said Huckaby, to whom as Mrs. Fontaine's childhood friend this talk had been mainly addressed.

Lady Louisa sighed sentimentally. She was an old maid, the seventh of eleven daughters of an impecunious Irish earl now defunct. Her face, such as it was, had been her fortune, and it had attracted no suitors.

"Not that she isn't very much admired. She knows hundreds of nice men, and I'm sure heaps of them want to marry her; but, no. She likes them as friends. As a husband she wants something more. The modern man is so material and unintellectual, don't you think so?"

This Diana (with a touch of Minerva) among widows came up, swinging the little bag of which she had gone in search.

"I'm sure Lady Louisa has been talking about me," she laughed.

"She has not been taking away your character, I assure you," said Quixtus.

"I know. She has been giving me one. And the worst of it is, I have to live up to it—or at least try. I suppose it's always worth while having an ideal before one, though it may be somebody else's."

"You believe in an ideal of goodness?" asked Quixtus.

She raised her dreamy eyes to his and looked at him candidly.

"Why, yes, don't you?"

"No," he replied, with a darkening brow. "There is only one force in nature, which is wickedness. Man sometimes resists it for fear of the consequences, and the measure of his cowardly resistance is by a curious inversion taken by him to be the measure of his striving towards an ideal."

Mrs. Fontaine exclaimed warmly: "I must cure you of your pessimism."

"There is only one remedy."

"And that?"

"The same as will cure the disease of life."

"You mean death?"

"Yes," said Quixtus.

"It's a remedy; but not the only one." Her pale cheeks flushed adorably. "In fact, it's only by a twist of language you can call it a remedy. The only remedy against the malady of life is life itself. The bane is its own antidote. The only cure for loss of illusions is fresh illusions, more illusions, and always illusions."

"Supposing for argument's sake you are right—where are they to come from?"

"They form of themselves, like fresh tissue of the flesh, without your volition."

"Only in healthy flesh," said Quixtus, with his tired smile. "So in a gangrened soul there can be built up no fresh tissue of illusions."

Womanlike, she begged the question, maintaining that there was no such thing as a gangrened soul. She shuddered prettily. Belief therein was a horrible superstition. She proclaimed her faith in the ultimate good of things. Quixtus said ironically:

"The ultimate good takes a long time coming. In the ages in which I, as a student, am interested, men slew each other with honest hatchets. Now they slay by the poisoned word and the treacherous deed. The development of mind has for its history the development of craft and cunning, of which the supreme results are a religion as to whose essential tenets scarcely two persons can agree, a rule of thumb arrangement of purely mechanical appliances, which is the so-called wonder of wireless telegraphy, and an infinite capacity for cruelty which has rendered Hell a mild and futile shadow in human speculation. Whatever hellishness human imagination could invent as the work of devils, calm history, the daily newspaper, your own experience of life tells you has already been surpassed by the work of man. Sometimes one is tempted to cry, like Ferdinand in *The Tempest,* 'Hell is empty, and all the devils are here!' But if it was, and the devils were here, they would be hard put to it to find a society in which they should not be compelled to hold up their tails before their snouts in shame and horror. You would find them meeker than the meekest of the Young Men's Christian Association."

He spoke with a certain crazy earnestness which arrested Lena Fontaine. Heartless, desperate, cynical though she was, intelligent, too, and swift of brain,

she had never formulated to herself so disastrous a philosophy. She leaned forward, an elbow on the wickerwork table.

"Such a faith is dreadful," she said seriously. "It reduces living among one's fellow-creatures to walking through a horde of savages—never knowing whether some one may not club you on the head or stab you in the back."

"Can you ever tell whether your dearest friend isn't going to stab you in the back?" asked Quixtus.

His pale blue eyes held her with a curious insistence. Her eyelids flickered with something like shame as though she had divined a personal application of the question. She shivered; this time naturally.

"Oh, I love to believe in goodness," she exclaimed, "although I may not practise every virtue myself. There would be no sunshine in a purely wicked world." She plucked up courage and looked him in the face.

"Do you think I, for instance, am just one mass of badness?"

"My dear Mrs. Fontaine," replied the pessimist, with his courtly smile, "you must not crush me by using the privilege of your sex—arguing from general to particular."

"But do you?" she insisted.

"I believe," said he, with a little inclination of his head, "all that Lady Louisa has been telling me."

The talk ran for a while in lighter channels. Lady Louisa and Huckaby, who had been discussing cookery—he had held her in watery-mouthed attention while he gave her from memory Izaak Walton's recipe for roasting a jack—joined in the conversation.

"You two have been having a very deep argument," said Lady Louisa.

"I have been trying to convert him to optimism," laughed Mrs. Fontaine. "It seems to be difficult. But

I'll do so in time. I'm a determined woman. I've a good mind to forbid you to leave Paris before your conversion."

"The process would be pleasant, though the result would be problematical."

"I'm not going to argue with you. I just want to make you see things for yourself."

"I will submit gladly to your guidance," said Quixtus.

She looked at the little watch on her bracelet, and her rising brought the little party to their feet.

"Shall we begin now? I'm going to walk up the Rue de la Paix and see the shops."

Quixtus also consulted his watch. "I shall be honoured if you will let me walk up the Rue de la Paix with you. But then I must reluctantly leave you. I must meet my confrères of the Congress at the railway-station to go to Sèvres to see Monsieur Sardanel's collection."

"What has Sèvres china to do with anthropology?"

He smiled at her ignorance. Monsieur Sardanel had the famous collection of Mexican antiquities—terra-cotta rattles and masks and obsidian-edged swords.

Her long lashes swept shyly upwards. "I'm sure I could show you much more interesting things than those."

It was a long time since a pretty and fascinating woman had evinced a desire for his company. He was a man, as well as a diabolically-minded anthropologist. Yet there was a green avanturine quartz axehead in the collection which he particularly lusted to behold. He stood irresolute, while Mrs. Fontaine turned with a laugh and took Lady Louisa aside. He caught Huckaby's glance, in which he surprised a flicker of anxiety. Huckaby was wondering whether this was the right moment to speak. It seemed so.

Yet the more he thought over the matter, the less was he inclined to cut the disgraceful figure in Quixtus's eyes of the base betrayer of his supposed childhood's flower-like friend. Here, however, was the wished-for opportunity, when Quixtus was evidently hesitating between primitive clay masks and a living woman's face. He resolved to throw all the onus of the decision on Quixtus's shoulders.

"I'm afraid these dear ladies rather interfere with the prospects of our little adventure," he said, drawing him a step or two from the table where they had been sitting.

"I never thought of it," said Quixtus truthfully.

Then an idea of malignant cunning took possession of his brain. Mrs. Fontaine should be the woman, and Huckaby should not know. Her heart he would break and, when it was broken, he would confound Huckaby with the piteous shards and enjoy a doubly diabolical triumph. In the meantime he must dissemble; for Huckaby would not deliberately allow his old friend's happiness to be wrecked. To hide a smile he crossed the passage of the lounge and lit a cigarette from matches on one of the tables. Then he turned.

"My dear fellow," said he, "let us talk no more about the adventure, as you call it. It never really pleased me."

"But surely——" Huckaby began.

"It's distasteful," he interrupted, "and there's an end of it."

"As you will," said Huckaby, for the moment uncertain.

Mrs. Fontaine approached them smiling, provocative in the dainty candour of her white dress and hat.

"Well? Have you decided?"

Quixtus paused for the fraction of a second. The lady swept him with her dreamy glance. A modern

Merlin, he yielded. This delicious wickedness at last on foot, Sardanel and all his spoils of Mexico could go hang.

"For the afternoon," said he, "I am your humble disciple."

They went forth together, outwardly as gay a company as ever issued through the great gates of the Hôtel Continental into the fairyland of Paris; inwardly, save one of their number, psychological complexities as dark as any that have emerged into its mocking and inscrutable spirit. Of the three, Quixtus, the tender-hearted scholar of darkened mind, who could no more have broken a woman's heart than have trampled on a baby, pathetically bent on his intellectually-conceived career of Evil and entirely unconscious of being himself the dupe and victim—of the three, Quixtus was certainly the happiest. Huckaby, touched with shame, avoided meeting his accomplice's eye. He walked in front with Lady Louisa, finding refuge in her placid dulness.

Once during the afternoon, when Lena Fontaine found herself for a moment by his side, she laughed cynically.

"Do you know what you two remind me of? Martha and Mephistopheles."

"And you are Gretchen to the life."

The retort was obvious; but apparently it was not anticipated. Mrs. Fontaine flushed scarlet at the sneer. She looked at him hard-eyed, and said, with set teeth:

"I wish to God I were."

CHAPTER XIV

SOMETHING was wrong with Tommy Burgrave. Instead of flinging excited hands in the direction of splendid equipage or beautiful woman, he sat glum by Clementina's side, while the most dazzling procession in Europe passed before his eyes. Of course it was a little cockneyfied to sit on a public bench on the edge of the great Avenue of the Champs Elysées; but Clementina knew that consciousness of cockneydom would not disturb the serenity of Tommy's soul. Something else was the matter. He was ill at ease. Gloom darkened his brow and care perched on his shoulders.

The car of thirty-five million dove-power which had brought the wanderers, the day before, to Paris, had deposited Etta Concannon at the house of some friends for a few hours' visit, and Tommy and Clementina at Ledoyen's, where they had lunched. It was over the *truite à la gelée* that Tommy's conversation had begun to flag. His melancholy deepened as the meal proceeded. When they strolled, after lunch, across to the Avenue, his face assumed an expression of acute misery. He sat forward, elbows on knees, and traced sad diagrams on the gravel with the point of his cane.

"My good Tommy," said Clementina at last—what on earth was the matter with the boy?—"you look as merry as a museum."

He groaned. "I'm in a devil of a fix, Clementina."

"Indeed?"

What could he be in a fix about? Anything more

aggravatingly, insolently, excruciatingly happy than the pair of young idiots whom she had accompanied in the thirty-five million dove-power car aforesaid, she had never beheld in her life. Sometimes it was as much as she could do to restrain herself from stopping the car and dumping the pair of them down by the wayside and telling them to go and play Daphnis and Chloe by themselves in the sylvan solitudes of France, instead of conducting their antic gambols over her heartstrings. The air re-echoed deafeningly with coo-ings, and the sky grew sickly with smiles. What could a young man in love want more?

"It's the biggest, awfullest mess that ever a fellow got into," said Tommy.

"Well, I suppose it's your own fault," she remarked, with just a touch of the vindictive. She had emptied her heart of heaven and thrown it at the boy's feet, and he had not so much as said "thank you."

"I'm not so sure," said Tommy.

"That's just like a man," said Clementina. "Every one of you is ready enough to cry *peccavi,* but it's invariably somebody else's *maxima culpa.*"

"I didn't cry *peccavi* at all," said Tommy. "I suppose I had better do so, though," he added, after a gloomy pause. "I've been a cad. I've been abusing your hospitality. Any man of honour would kick me all over the place. But I swear to you it was not my fault. How the deuce could I help it?"

"Help what, my good Tommy?"

Tommy dug his stick fiercely in the gravel. "Help falling in love with Etta. There! now it's out. Of course you had no idea of it."

"Of course not," said Clementina, with a wry twist of her mouth, not knowing whether to shriek with insane laughter or with pain at the final cut of the whip with which she had flagellated the offending Eve.

But her grim sense of humour prevailed, though her strength allowed it to manifest itself only in the twinkling of her keen eyes.

"I don't know what you can think of me," said Tommy.

She made no reply, reflecting on the success of her comedy. As she had planned, so had it fallen out. She had saved her own self-respect—more, her self-honour—and she had saved him from making muddy disaster of his own life. The simplicity of the boy touched her deeply. The dear, ostrich reasoning of youth! Of course she had no idea of it! She looked at him, sitting there, as a man sometimes looks at a very pure woman—with a pitying reverence in her eyes. But Tommy did not see the look, contemplating as he was the blackness of his turpitude. For each of them it was a wholesome moment.

"You see, not only was I your guest, but I held a kind of position of trust," continued Tommy. "She was, as it were, in my charge. If I had millions, I oughtn't to have fallen in love with her. As I'm absolutely penniless, it's a crime."

"I don't think falling in love with a sweet girl is a crime," said Clementina gently. "There's one in that automobile"—she nodded in the direction of a rosebud piece of womanhood in a carriage that was held up by a block in the traffic, just in front of them. "If any man fell in love with her right off, as she sat there, not knowing her, it wouldn't be a crime. It would be a divine adventure."

"She's not worth two penn'orth of paint," said Tommy disparagingly—now Clementina has told me that this was a singularly beautiful girl—such are other women than his Dulcinea in the eyes of the true lover—"she isn't even doll-pretty. But suppose she were, for the sake of argument—it might be a divine

adventure for the fool who fell in love with her and never told her; but for the penniless cad who went up and told her—and got her love in return—it would be a crime."

Now it must be remembered that Tommy was entirely ignorant of the fact that a fortune of two thousand pounds, the spoils of Old Joe Jenks, was coyly lying at his banker's, who had made the usual acknowledgment to the payer-in and not to the payee.

"So you've told Etta?" said Clementina, feeling curiously remote from him and yet curiously drawn to him.

"This morning," said Tommy, glowering at the ground. "In the hall of the hotel, waiting for you to come down."

"Oh!" said Clementina, who had deliberately lingered.

"It wasn't your fault," said Tommy with dark magnanimity. "It was the fault of that damned glove. She asked me to button it for her. Why do women wear gloves thirty sizes too small for them? Why can't they wear sensible easy things like a man? I was fussing over the infernal thing—I had somehow got her arm perpendicular in front of her face and I was bending down and she was looking up—oh, can't you see?" He broke off impatiently.

"Oh, yes, I can see," replied Clementina. "And I suppose Etta was utterly indignant?"

"That's the devil of it," said the conquering but miserable lover. "She wasn't."

"She wasn't?" asked Clementina.

"No," said Tommy.

"Then I'm shocked at her," said Clementina. "She was in my charge, enjoying my hospitality. She had no business to fall in love with—with my"—she floundered for a second—"with my invalid guest."

"Pretty sort of invalid I am," said Tommy, who, through the masquerade of woe, appealed to passers-by, especially to those of the opposite sex, as the embodiment of fair Anglo-Saxon lustiness. "She isn't to blame, poor dear. I am, and yet, confound it! I'm not—for how could I help it? But what the deuce there is in me, Clementina dear, for the most exquisite thing God ever made to care for, God only knows."

Clementina put her hand—the glove on it, so different from Etta's, was thirty sizes too large; it was of white cotton, and new—she had sent the page boy of the hotel that morning to buy her a pair—she put her gloved hand on his. At the touch he raised his eyes to her's. He saw in them something—he was too young and ingenuous to know what—but something he had not seen in Clementina's eyes before.

"You're right, my dear boy," she said. "God knows. That being so, it is up to Him, as the Americans say, to make good. And He'll make good. That is, if you really love that little girl."

"Love her!" cried Tommy. "Why——"

"Yes, yes," Clementina interrupted hastily. "I'm convinced of it. You needn't go into raptures." She had endured much the last few weeks. She felt now that the penance of listening to amatory dithyrambics was supererogatory. "All I want to know is that you love her like a man."

"That I do," said Tommy.

"And she loves you?"

Tommy nodded lugubriously. She loved him for nodding.

"Then why the devil are you trying to make me miserable on this beautiful afternoon?"

He twisted round on the bench and faced her. "Then you're not angry with me—you don't think I've been a blackguard?"

"I think the two of you are innocent lambs," said Clementina.

Tommy grinned. He, the seasoned man of the world of twenty-three, to be called an innocent lamb! Much Clementina knew about it.

"All the same," said he, reverting to his gloom, "you're different from other people; you have your own way of looking at things. Ordinary folk would say I had behaved abominably. Admiral Concannon would kick me out of the house if I went and asked him for his daughter. It's Gilbertian! There's a Bab Ballad almost on the same theme," he laughed. "I guess I'd better not speak to the Admiral yet awhile."

"I guess not," said Clementina. "Leave well alone for the present."

This advice she gave to Etta when that young person, before going to bed, told her the marvellous news. But Etta's anxiety as to future ways and means was the least of her preoccupations, which consisted, in the main, of wonder at Tommy's transcendent perfections, and at her extraordinary good fortune in winning the favour of such a miracle of a man. Clementina left her radiant and went to bed with a headache and a bit of a heartache. The one little Elf of Romance that had crossed her grey path she had snubbed unmercifully. Would ever another chance come by? Would he not go back and tell his congeners of the flinty-bosomed, sour-avised female who had nearly frightened him to death, and bid them all beware of her devastating presence? It was no use her saying that she loved the Elf with all her heart, but had to dissemble her love, for the Elf, like the lover in the poem, would naturally ask the historic question. Yet she did love him, and in the secrecy of her soul longed for such another—but one perhaps who would put before her a less Puckish proposition. How could she

attract one? With what lure could she entice him?

"Bosh!" she said, after a couple of sleepless hours. "It's high time I was back at work again."

Now, be it here definitely stated that Clementina misjudged the Elf. He was mightily amused by her treatment of him, and ran away with his elfin thumb to his elfin nose in the most graceless and delicious manner possible. He swore revenge. In his cobweb seat he thought hard. Then he slapped his thighs and laughed, and returned to Elfland where he raised a prodigious commotion.

The result of this will be duly set forth in the following pages.

"We leave Paris to-morrow," said Clementina, buttoning her cotton gloves. "I must work, and Tommy must work, and Etta must learn to cook and sew and scrub saucepans. The holiday is about to end."

Two sighs greeted the announcement.

"Can't we have one other day?" Etta pleaded.

"You just need the extra day to make you quite fit again," said Tommy.

Clementina, unmoved by pleading or sophistry, replied, "We start to-morrow."

Etta looked at Tommy and sorrowfully licked from her finger-tips the squirted cream of an *éclair*. They had just finished tea at Colombin's, a form of amusement to which Etta was addicted. She liked the crowded room, the band, the bustle of the waitresses and the warm smell of tea and chocolate and pastry. She also had the perverted craving of female youth to destroy its appetite for dinner. She looked at Tommy and cleansed herself from *éclair* like a dainty kitten; but Tommy's eyes were fixed to the entrance of the tea-room. He half rose from his chair.

"Lord Almighty, if that isn't Uncle Ephraim!"

"Where?" cried Clementina.

He nodded, and Clementina, turning her head, saw Quixtus, one of a party of four, two men and two ladies, threading their way between the chattering tables under the guidance of a waitress. They found places not far off. Quixtus sat down with his back to Clementina.

"I wonder whom he has got hold of," said Tommy.

"She's *awfully* pretty," said Etta, glancing at Mrs. Fontaine.

"Passable," said Tommy. "I don't care for women who look like nuns."

"She doesn't look a bit like a nun," she contradicted. "She's talking and laughing like anything."

Clementina said nothing, but studied the woman's face. The portrait painter's instinct arose. She would like to get her in the sitter's chair and see what sort of a thing would come out on the canvas. The woman seemed to be the mistress of the feast. It was she who apportioned the seats and gave the orders; also it was she who led the animated conversation. The party seemed to be intimate.

"Whatever the crowd is, they're having a good time," said Tommy. "An unusual thing for my uncle."

"Perhaps that's because he's crazy," suggested Etta.

"Perhaps," said Tommy. "I should like to knock some sanity into him, though," he added ruefully; "especially as things are at present."

"So should I," remarked Clementina, and again she scrutinised the woman's face.

"Perhaps his reason will come back when he sees Etta!" cried Tommy, laughing boyishly. "I'll go and present her."

"You'll do no such thing," said Clementina.

But Clementina, when they had risen to leave the tea-room, found that she had counted without her

hosts, who had arranged the crowded tables in such a manner that in order to reach the exit door, she and her charges had to pass immediately behind Huckaby, who sat facing Quixtus. Chance had also caused a temporary blocking of the gangway a little further on. The trio came to a compulsory standstill beside the quartette. Tommy stretched out a frank hand.

"Hullo, Uncle Ephraim! What are you doing here?"

Quixtus rose and took the proffered hand, but he did not answer the indiscreet question.

"How d'ye do, Tommy? I hope I see you well." Then he became conscious of Clementina, whom he greeted with stiff courtesy.

"I must present you to Miss Etta Concannon," said Tommy. "This is my uncle, Dr. Quixtus. We've been motoring all over France with Clementina. Had a gorgeous time."

Again Clementina looked at the woman with the nun's face and the alluring eyes, and this time the woman looked at Clementina. Between the two pairs of eyes was a second's invisible rapier play. Mrs. Fontaine broke into a laugh.

"Won't you introduce me, Dr. Quixtus?" And then, the introductions being effected—"I hope you're staying a long while in Paris."

"We leave to-morrow," snapped Clementina. "And you?" she asked, turning to Quixtus.

He made a vague gesture. A week's Seine water had flowed beneath the bridges since he had first walked up the Rue de la Paix with Mrs. Fontaine, and that week had been full of interest, morbid and otherwise. Not only did he hug himself in his imaginary wrap of diabolical wickedness, but also—if he could admit the truth—he was enjoying himself enormously in the most blameless fashion. Mrs. Fontaine showing no

"HELLO, UNCLE EPHRAIM! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

particular desire to leave Paris, he had adjourned his own departure *sine die*.

"I am remaining some time yet," he replied.

"In the interests of Prehistoric Man?"

The implication was brutal. Two little red spots rose to Mrs. Fontaine's cheeks. She conceived a sudden hatred for the rough-voiced, keen-eyed creature with her untidy hair and caricature of a hat. A retort, containing the counter-implication of Clementina's resemblance to a prehistoric woman, was tempting. But it would lay herself open to obvious attack. She laughed.

"We are all helping Dr. Quixtus to recover from Prehistoric Man. He has just been attending an Anthropological Congress."

"Umph!" said Clementina.

"Where are you staying, Uncle Ephraim?" asked Tommy.

"At the Hôtel Continental."

"I'll come and look you up—to-night or to-morrow morning."

Why should he not treat Quixtus as hard-hearted uncles are treated in the story-books? *Videlicet*, why should not Etta and himself go hand in hand before him, tell him their tragic and romantic history, and, falling pathetically on their knees, beg for his blessing and subvention? To thrust so fair a flower as Etta from him—surely he could not be as crazy as all that? But Quixtus threw cold water on the ardent fancy.

"I'm sorry to say that both to-night and to-morrow morning I shall be engaged."

"Then I'll look you up in London when you get back," said Tommy cheerfully.

A gangway to the door being now clear, Clementina made perfunctory adieux to Quixtus and his

friends, and henlike, marshalling her two chickens in front of her, sailed out of the tea-room.

"He doesn't look at all horrid," said Etta, when they reached the street. "I wonder what makes him behave so. And how generous of you, Tommy, to be so sweet to him!"

Tommy smiled as if he were compact of lofty qualities.

"I've been blessing him all the time," he whispered in her ear, "for if it hadn't been for his craziness I shouldn't be here with you."

Clementina trudged on in silence until they turned into the Rue Saint-Honoré, where their hotel was situated. Then she said suddenly:

"I don't like your uncle, and I don't like his friends. I'm sorry we ran into them. If we stayed on in Paris we should be running into them every day. I'm glad we're clearing out to-morrow."

Whereupon the Elf, who had returned from Elfland to haunt her, laughed immoderately; for he knew that at the bureau of the hotel a telegram was awaiting her.

CHAPTER XV

CLEMENTINA sat in the vestibule and fanned herself with the telegram. It was from Marseilles and had been telegraphed on from London. It ran:

"Doctors say I am dying. Come at once here, Hôtel Louvre. Matter of life and death. Am wiring Quixtus also. For Heaven's sake both come.

"WILL HAMMERSLEY."

It was a shock. Hammersley's letter of a few weeks ago had prepared her for his indefinite advent; but the thought of death had not come to her. Will Hammersley was dying, apparently alone, in an hotel at Marseilles; dying, too, in an atmosphere of mystery, for he must see her, and Quixtus, too, before he died. The message was urgent, the appeal imperative.

"Oh, Clementina, I hope it's not bad news," cried Etta.

Clementina handed the telegram to Tommy.

"It's from the sick man of Shanghai who pined for the English lanes."

"Poor chap," said Tommy very gently. "Poor chap! I remember him well. A fine upstanding fellow, one of the best. Once he gave me a cricket-bat." The artist in him shivered. "It's awful to think of a man like that dying. What are you going to do?"

"What do you think?"

"Take the night train to Marseilles," replied Tommy.

"Then why did you ask?" said Clementina.

"But what shall we do?" cried Etta.

"Oh, you and Tommy can stay here till I come back."

Etta gasped and blushed crimson. "That would be very nice—but—but—I don't think dad would quite like it."

"Oh, Lord!" cried Clementina, "I was forgetting those confounded conventions. They do complicate life so. And I suppose I can't send you away with Tommy in the motor, either. And now I come to think of it, I can't go away to-night and leave you two to travel together to London to-morrow. What on earth are women put in the world for, especially young ones? They're more worry than they're worth. And if I left Tommy here and took you with me to Marseilles, you'd be as handy to travel with, in the circumstances, as a wedding-cake. I don't know what to do with you."

Etta suggested that the Jacksons—the friends whom she had visited the previous day—might take her in till Clementina came back. Indeed, they had invited her to stay with them.

"Go and telephone them at once," said Clementina.

"You'll have Uncle Ephraim as a travelling companion," Tommy remarked as Etta was leaving them.

Clementina rubbed a distracted brow, not to the well-being of her front hair.

"Lord save us! He'll be worse than Etta."

"Poor dear Clementina," he said, and turned away to administer help and counsel to his beloved in the complicated matter of the telephone.

Suddenly Clementina started to her feet. Perhaps Quixtus's telegram had not been forwarded as hers

had been. In this contingency it was her duty to let him know the unhappy news, and she must let him know at once. An ordinary woman would have sent Tommy round with the telegram. But Clementina, accustomed all her life long to act for herself, gave no thought to this possibility. She bolted out of the door of the hotel and made her way back to the tea-room.

The crowd had thinned, but Quixtus and his friends still lingered. Mrs. Fontaine, her elbows on the table, leaning her cheek against her daintily-gloved hands, was engaged in earnest talk with him, to the exclusion of the other pair. Lady Louisa Malling was eating pastry and drinking chocolate with an air of great enjoyment, while Huckaby, hands in pockets, leant back in his seat, a very bored Mephistopheles. He had exhausted his Martha's conversation long ago, and he was weary of the eternal companionship. Why should not Faust have a turn at Martha now and again? Decidedly it was an unfair world. To add, also, to his present discomfort, the confused frame of mind in which he had originally introduced his patron to Mrs. Fontaine had gradually become more tangled. Clean living had grown more to his taste, abstinence from whisky much more simple to accomplish than his most remorseful dreams of reform had ever conceived. And that morning a letter from Billiter had filled him with disgust. Billiter upbraided him for silence, wanted to know what was going on, hinted that a dividend ought to be due by this time, and expressed, none too delicately, a suspicion of his partner's business integrity. The cheap tavern-supplied note-paper offended against the nicety of Huckaby's refined surroundings. The gross vulgarity of Billiter himself revolted him. A week had passed and Mrs. Fontaine had shown no signs of having accomplished her ends. He had not dared question her. He had begun, too, to loathe his

part in the sordid plot. But that morning he had summoned up courage enough to say to Mrs. Fontaine:

"I've just had a letter from Billiter."

Whereupon her pale cheeks had flushed red and her alluring eyes had gleamed dangerously.

"I wish to God I had never seen that brute in all my life!"

And he had said: "I wish to God I had never done so, either."

She had looked at him full, searchingly, inscrutably, for a long moment and, saying nothing, had turned away. What was to be the outcome of it all? Huckaby was perplexed. The week had passed pleasantly. Even his enforced and sardonic attendance on Martha had not been able to spoil the charm of the new life, bastard though it was. Mrs. Fontaine had continued not to let her friends in Paris know of her presence in the city, and the week had been a history of peaceful jaunts—to Chantilly, Fontainebleau, Sèvres (where Monsieur Sardanel had spread before their ravished eyes his collection of Mexican rattles and masks and obsidian-edged swords); to "Robinson" on the island in the Seine, where they had lunched in the tree restaurant; in a word, to all sorts of sweet summer places where the trees were green and the world was bathed in sunshine and innocence. The week had evidently passed pleasantly for Quixtus, who had given no intimation of the date of his return to London. He was lotus eating; obviously, too, under the charm of the sorceress, wax in her hands. Of his fiendish purpose Huckaby still had no suspicion. As far as Huckaby could see, Mrs. Fontaine had made an easy conquest of his patron, and why she had up to now forborne to carry out the essential part of the plot he could not understand. Perhaps she loathed the idea

as much as he did. Her outburst against Billiter gave weight to the theory. It was all very complicated. And here were these two engaged in a deep and semi-sentimental conversation while Lady Louisa stuffed herself with chocolate, and he, Huckaby, was bored to death. What was going to happen?

The thing that did happen was Clementina's inrush. She marched straight up to the table, and, disregarding startled eyes, thrust the telegram into Quixtus's hand.

"Read that. You may find one like it at your hotel, or you may not. I thought it right to bring it."

Mrs. Fontaine kept her elbows on the table, and regarded Clementina with well-bred insolence. Lady Louisa finished her chocolate. Quixtus read the telegram and his face grew a shade paler and his fingers trembled a little. Huckaby rose and, drawing a chair from another table, offered it to Clementina. She waved it away, with a curt acknowledgment. Quixtus looked up at her.

"This is terrible—Will Hammersley dying——"

He made an attempt to rise, but Clementina put her hand on his shoulder.

"Don't get up. I'm going."

A sudden hardening change came over Quixtus's features.

"Stay," said he. "It was very kind of you to bring this; but I'm afraid it has nothing to do with me."

"Nothing to do with you?"

She regarded him in amazement. "Your lifelong friend is dying and implores you to come to him, and you say it's nothing to do with you?"

"He was a villain, a base villain," said Quixtus, with quivering lips.

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried Clementina indignantly.

Had the man gone absolutely crazy after all?

"I am saying what I know," he returned darkly. "He was no friend to me."

"And he wants you to go to his death-bed?" asked Mrs. Fontaine, taking her elbows off the table. "How very painful!"

"You had better put such lunatic ideas out of your head and take the night train to Marseilles," said Clementina roughly.

Quixtus bit his knuckles and stared at the litter of tea in front of him. The orchestra for their last number played a common little jiggety air.

"Are you coming?" asked Clementina.

"Why should Dr. Quixtus," said Mrs. Fontaine, "travel all the way to Marseilles to witness the death of a man whom he dislikes? I think it's unreasonable to ask it."

"Yes, yes," said Quixtus. "It's unreasonable."

"And it would break up our pleasant little party," pleaded Lady Louisa.

"Confound your party!" exclaimed Clementina; whereat Lady Louisa withered up in astonishment. "I'm telling him to perform an act of humanity."

"He was my enemy," said Quixtus in a low voice.

"And so you can hardly ask him to go and gloat over his death," said Lady Louisa stupidly.

"Eh? What's that?" cried Quixtus, straightening himself up.

"We're dealing with Christian gentlemen, not devils," Clementina retorted.

"No, not devils—oh, certainly not devils," said Quixtus with a chuckling catch in his voice.

Clementina plucked him by the sleeve.

"I can't stand here all the afternoon arguing with you. Even if you have got it into your head that the man offended you, you did care for him once, and it's

only common charity to go to him now that he's at the point of death. Are you going or not?"

Quixtus looked helplessly from one woman to the other.

"There's such a thing as straining quixotism too far, my dear Dr. Quixtus," said Mrs. Fontaine. "I see no reason why you should go."

"I'm a decent woman, and I see every reason," said Clementina, infuriated at the other's intervention. "I'll see that he goes. I'll get tickets now from Cook's and come round to the Continental in a taxi and fetch you."

Quixtus rose and extended his hand to Clementina.

"I shall go. I promise you," he said with all his courtliness of manner. "And I shall not trouble you to get my ticket or call for me. *Au revoir.*"

He accompanied her to the door. On parting he said with a smile:

"I have my reasons for going—reasons that no one but myself can understand."

And when he returned to Mrs. Fontaine, who was biting her lips with annoyance at Clementina's apparent victory, he repeated the words with the same smile and the curious gleam of cunning that sometimes marred the blandness of his eyes. He had his reasons.

"After all," said the lady, during their Faust and Marguerite walk to the Hôtel Continental entrance in the Rue Castiglione, "I can't blame you. It's an errand of mercy. Doubtless he wishes to absolve his conscience from the wrong, whatever it was, that he did you. Your *pétroleuse* friend was right. It is a noble action."

"I have my reasons," said Quixtus.

"We have become such friends," she said, after a little pause, "at least I hope so, that I shall miss you

very much. I have very few friends," she added with a sigh.

"If I am one, I esteem it a great honour," said Quixtus.

"I wonder whether you'll care to see me when you get back to Paris."

"Will you still be here?"

"If you promise to stay a little while and finish up our holiday."

He met her upturned alluring eyes. For all his visionary malignancy he was a man—and a man who never before had been in the hands of the seductress; an unaccustomed thrill ran through him, causing him to catch his breath.

"I promise," said he huskily, "to stay here as long as it is your good pleasure."

"Then you do care to see me?"

"You ought to know," said the infatuated one.

"What signs have you given me?"

"Signs that every woman must read."

She laughed. "Every man to his method. I like yours. It's neither Cinquecento nor Louis XV. nor Directoire. The nearest to it is Jane Austen. But it's really Quixtine."

Now nothing can flatter a man more than to be assured that he has an original method of love-making. Quixtus glowed with conscious idiosyncrasy. He also felt most humanly drawn towards the flatterer.

"You may count on my returning to you at the earliest possible moment," said he. "May I be commonplace enough to remark that I shall count the hours?"

"Everything beautiful on the earth," she replied with a sweet sentimentalism, "is but the apotheosis of the commonplace."

The shrieking siren of a passing motor-car drowned

this last remark. He begged her to repeat it and bowed his ear to her lips. Her breath caught his cheek and made his pulses throb.

"I have a plan," she said, as they entered the hotel. "Why shouldn't we have a little dinner to ourselves? Your train doesn't go till 9.35. I'm learned in trains, you see. And I'm also learned in Paris restaurants."

"Nothing could be more delightful," said Quixtus.

It was only when he found himself alone in his room and reflected on the "reasons" for his journey to Marseilles that the crazy part of his brain summed up his amatory situation. He laughed sedately. He held the woman's heart in his hands. At any hour he could dash it on the pavement of Paris, whereon so many hearts of women had been broken. At any hour could he work this great wickedness. But not to-night. To-night he would take the heart in a firmer grip. He would dally with the delicious malignity. Besides, his fastidiousness forbade an orgy of pleasure. One wickedness at a time. Was he not bound even now for Marseilles, on a merciless errand? This deed of darkness must be accomplished swiftly. The other could wait. As a crown to his contentment came the realisation that these, his supreme projects of devildom, lay hidden in his own heart, secret from Huckaby and his fellow minions. They were futile knaves, all of them. Well, perhaps not Huckaby. Huckaby had more than once expressed the desire to reform. . . .

By the way, what should be done with Huckaby during his absence in Marseilles? He was useless in Paris. Why not send him back to London?

He summoned Huckaby to his room, and, whilst packing, laid the question before him.

"For God's sake don't," said Huckaby, almost in terror.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I can't go back," said he, tugging at his beard, no longer straggly, but neatly cut to a point. "I can't go back to it all—to the squalour and drunkenness—it's no use mincing words with you—I can't do it. You've set me on the clean road, and you've got to see that I keep there. You've given me chances in the past and I abused them. You have the power to give me another —and I won't abuse it. I swear I won't. To kick me back again would be hellish wickedness."

"You're quite right," replied Quixtus gravely, balancing in his hand an ill-folded pair of trousers which he was about to put into his suit-case. "I appreciate your position perfectly. But, as I have implied to you before, in a similar conversation, hellish wickedness is what I—what I, in fact, am devoting my life to accomplish."

He packed the trousers and walked up and down the room, pondering darkly. It was a tempting piece of villainy to kick Huckaby back into the gutter. In a flash it could be done. But, as in all his attempted acts of vileness, the co-ordination between brain and will failed at the critical moment. A new aspect of the case flashed upon his disordered mind, showing an even more diabolical way of achieving Huckaby's ruin than throwing him back into the gutter. By a curious transmogrification, it was he, Quixtus, who now blazed luridly as the Master of Mischief, and Huckaby as the shrinking innocent. The enforced association of the shrinking innocent with the Master of Mischief could have no other result than the constant sapping of the victim's volition and the gradual but certain degradation of his soul. To accomplish this was a refinement of deviltry far beyond the imagination of his favourite fiend Macathiel. He decided promptly and halted in front of his former myrmidon. It was once

more necessary for him, however, like the villain in the old melodrama, to dissemble. He smiled and laid his hand on Huckaby's shoulder.

"All right," said he, in the old, kind voice that in the past had so often stabbed Huckaby's conscience. "I'll give you the chance. Just stick loyally to me. Stay with the ladies in Paris, and when I come back we can talk about things."

Huckaby gripped his hand.

"Thank you, Quixtus. I wish I could tell you—I've known all along—" he stammered in a hoarse voice. "Oh, I've played the devil with everything—and I don't know which is the damneder fool of us two."

"I am quite certain," said Quixtus with a conscious smile, which he assumed was Mephistophelian. "I am quite certain, my dear Huckaby, that you are."

In spite of the exultation that he felt (or deluded himself into feeling) at the triple wickedness wherewith he purposed to burden his soul, Quixtus dined with Mrs. Fontaine in a subdued frame of mind. It was not the fault of the dinner, for it was carefully selected by Mrs. Fontaine, who smiled pityingly at Quixtus's gastronomic ignorance; nor was it that of the place, a cosy little restaurant in the Passage Jouffroy; nor that of the lady, who appeared bent on pleasing. Deep down in his soul were stirrings of pity which his clouded brain could not interpret. Their effect, however, was a mild melancholy. Mrs. Fontaine's trained senses quickly noticed it, and she tuned her talk in key. She prided herself on being a sympathetic woman. By this time she had learned to discount his pessimistic utterances which she knew proceeded from the same psychological source as the lunatic desire to break a woman's heart which had been the inspiration of the plot. She discerned the essential

gentleness of the man, his tender impulses, his integral innocence, and established him in her own eyes as a pathetic spectacle. As to the heart-breaking, she felt secure. It was the only element of humour in the ghastly game, which day by day had grown more repulsive.

It was in this chastened mood that she met Huckaby on their return to the Continental. Quixtus went up to his room by the lift, and left them standing in the lounge.

"I can't do it," she said hurriedly. "Billiter and the whole lot of you can go to the devil. I'm out of it. With a man who can take care of himself, yes. I've no compunction. It's a fair fight. But this is too low down. It's like robbing a blind beggar. It revolts me. Understand—this is the end of it."

"Will you believe me," said Huckaby, "when I say that it's more than I can swallow, either? I'm honest. I'm out of it, too. Billiter can go to the devil."

She looked at him, as she had done before that day, long and searchingly, and her hard eyes gradually softened.

"Yes, I believe you."

Huckaby bowed. "I thank you, Mrs. Fontaine. And as we are on this painful subject, I should like to be frank with you. You know how this thing started. I began it in the first place as a joke, a wild jest, to humour him in his madness. The idea of Quixtus breaking a woman's heart is comic. But—God knows how—it developed into our—our association. The important part now is this—if you think you have been fooling him to the top of his bent, you're mistaken. When it came to the point of beginning his heart-breaking career, he shied at it. Told me the whole thing was profoundly distasteful and I must never mention the matter again."

"Well," asked Mrs. Fontaine, "what does that mean?"

"It means," said Huckaby, "that you've succeeded in making him fond of your society for its own sake."

She drew a deep breath. "Thank goodness, this nightmare of a farce is over."

"Now, I suppose you'll go back to London," said Huckaby.

She looked away from him, unseeing, down the long lounge, and her gloved hands unconsciously gripped each other hard; her bosom heaved. In the woman's dark soul strange things were happening, a curious, desperate hope was dawning. She remained like this for a few moments while Huckaby, unconscious of tensity, selected and lit a cigarette.

"No, I shan't go to London," she said at last, without turning her head. "I'll stay in Paris. I owe myself a holiday."

Ten minutes afterwards Quixtus had gone. They watched the wheels of the taxi that was carrying him to the Lyons station disappear beneath the great archway, and, with something like a sigh, they returned slowly to the lounge. Lena Fontaine threw herself on a seat, her hands by her side, in an attitude of weariness.

"Oh, God, I'm tired," she whispered.

Huckaby suggested bed. She shrugged her shoulders. It was not her body that was tired, she explained, but the ridiculous something that people called a soul. That was dead beat. She looked up at him as he stood before her wondering to hear her talk so frankly.

"What was it that played the devil with you? A woman?"

"Drink," replied Huckaby laconically.

"I hadn't even that excuse," said Lena Fontaine.

She laughed mirthlessly. "Don't you wish you were good?"

He sat down by her side.

"Why shouldn't we try to be?"

"Because the world isn't a Sunday School, my dear friend."

Huckaby ventured to touch her hand with the tip of his finger.

"Let us try," said he.

She smiled—this time only in half derision.

"Let us," she said.

A great silence fell upon them, and they sat there side by side for a long, long time, pretending to watch, like many other couples and groups in the lounge, the shifting life of the great hotel, but really far away from it all, feeling drawn together in their new-found shame like two dreary souls who had escaped from Purgatory and were wandering through darkness they knew not whither.

CHAPTER XVI

THE great train thundered on straight down through the heart of France. Almost the length of it separated Quixtus and Clementina. They had seen each other only for a few moments amid the bustle of the hurrying platform—just long enough for her quick vision to perceive, in the uncertain blue light of the arc-lamps, a haunted look in his eyes that was absent when she had first met him that afternoon. He had spoken a few courteous phrases; he had inquired whether Tommy and Etta, who clung to her to the last, were to be fellow travellers, whereon Clementina had very definitely informed him that Etta was staying with friends in Paris, while Tommy had arranged to visit a painter chum at Barbizon; he had expressed the hope that when they arrived at Marseilles she would command his services, and, after a bare-headed leave-taking of the two ladies, which caused Etta afterwards to remark that it was only her short skirt that had prevented her from making her court curtsey, he had gone in search of his own compartment.

Etta had flung her arms round Clementina's neck.

"Oh, Clementina darling, do come back soon! The Jacksons are kind, but, oh, so stuffy! And Tommy is going to Barbizon, and I shan't see him, and if you don't come back soon, he'll have forogtten all about me."

Tommy had given her a great hug and kissed her.

"Good-bye, dear. God bless you. Come back soon. We can't do without you."

And Clementina, pausing on the first step of the railway carriage, had turned and raised her hand—the unfilled finger-ends of her cotton gloves projecting comically—and cried:

"Good-bye, you dear, selfish, detestable, beloved children!"

And neither of the twain had known what in the world she meant.

The great train thundered on through the country which Clementina had traversed a month or so before with Tommy—Dijon, Macon, Lyons. . . . Things had changed since then. Then a sweet rejuvenescence had crept through her veins; then she had amused herself with the idea of being a lady. The towns, whose names shouted through the awful stillness of the stations otherwise only broken by the eerie clank of the wheel-testers' hammers were now but abstract stages on her journey, then had a magical significance. . . . That must be Vienne through which they were dashing. . . . If the bitter-sweet, the tragi-comedy, the cardiac surgery of Vienne had not brought a smile to Clementina's lips in the dark solitude of her compartment, would she have been the sturdy, humorous Clementina who had cried her farewell to the children? Things had changed since then, she assured herself. She was just Clementina again, fighting her battles alone, impatient, contemptuous, unfeeling; no longer a lady, merely a female dauber, ready once more to paint elderly magnates' trousers at so much per leg. . . . She sighed and laughed. Those had been pleasant times. . . . That she should be going over the same ground now with Quixtus seemed a freakish trick of destiny.

At nine o'clock in the morning the train entered

Marseilles Station. Quixtus came speedily up to Clementina as she stepped onto the platform, and offered his services. He trusted she had slept well and had a comfortable journey.

"Didn't sleep a wink," said Clementina. "Did you?"

Quixtus admitted broken slumbers. The strangeness of the adventure had kept him awake.

"You're looking ill this morning," said Clementina, glancing at him sharply. "What's the matter with you?"

He seemed careworn, feverish, and an unnatural glitter had replaced the haunted look in his eyes. Clementina did not know how the approaching consummation of a deed of real wickedness terrified the mild and gentle-natured man. Hitherto his evil doings had been fantastic, repaired almost at once as if mechanically by the underlying instinct of generosity; his visions of sin had been fantastic, too, harmless, unpractical; but this sin of vengeance which he had intellectually conceived and fostered loomed great and terrible. So does the braggart who has sworn to eat up a lion alive, totter at the knees when he hears the lion's roar. His night had been that of a soul on fire.

"Something's wrong. What is it?" asked Clementina.

He answered vaguely. This summons had upset him. It had set him thinking, a tiring mental process. He remembered, said he, how Hammersley, when they were boys together, had called him to see a dying butterfly on a rose-bush. The yellow wings were still flapping languidly; then slower and slower; then strength gave out and they quivered in the last effort; and then the hold on the rose-bush relaxed and the butterfly fell to the earth—dead.

"What does Monsieur wish done with the bag-

gage?" asked the attendant porter, who had listened uncomprehendingly to the long and tragical tale.

Quixtus passed his hand across his forehead and looked at the porter as if awakening out of a dream.

"What you like," said he.

So forlorn and hag-ridden did he appear that a wave of pity swept through Clementina. The deadly phrase of the judge in the Marrable trial occurred to her: "Such men as you ought not to be allowed to go about loose." The mothering instinct more than her natural forcefulness made her take charge of the situation.

"The omnibus of the Hôtel du Louvre," she said to the man, and taking Quixtus by the arm, she led him like a child out of the station.

"Get in," she said with rough kindliness, pushing him towards the step of the omnibus. But he moved aside for her to precede him. Clementina said "Rubbish!" and entered the vehicle. She was no longer playing at being a lady. Quixtus followed her, and the omnibus clattered down the steep streets and jolted and swayed through the traffic and between the myriad tramcars that deface and deafen the city. The morning sun shone fiercely. The pavements baked. The sun-drenched buildings burned hot to the eye and the very awnings in the front of shops and over stalls in the markets suggested heat rather than coolness. Far away at the end of the Cannebière, the strip of sea visible glittered like a steel blade.

"Whew!" gasped Clementina, "what heat!"

"I feel it rather chilly," said Quixtus.

She stared at him, wiping a damp forehead. What was the matter with the man?

When they entered the fairly cool vestibule of the hotel, the manager met them and assigned the rooms. They asked for Hammersley. Alas, said the man-

ager, he was very ill. The doctor was with him even now. An elderly man in thin, sun-stained tweeds, who had been sitting in a corner playing with a child of five or six in charge of a Chinese nurse, came forward and greeted them.

"Are you the friends Mr. Hammersley telegraphed for? Miss Wing and Dr. Quixtus? My name is Poynter. I was a fellow-passenger of Mr. Hammersley's on the 'Moronia.' He was a sick man when he started; and got worse on the voyage. Impossible to land at Brindisi. Arrived here, he could go no further either by boat or train. He was quite helpless, so I stayed on till his friends could come. It was I who wrote out and sent the telegrams."

"That was very good of you," said Clementina.

Quixtus bowed vaguely, but spoke not a word. His lips were white. He held the front edges of his jacket crushed in a nervous grip. Poynter's voice sounded far away. He barely grasped the meaning of his words. A dynamo throbbed in his head instead of a brain.

"Is he dying?" asked Clementina.

Mr. Poynter made an expressive gesture. "I'm afraid so. He collapsed during the night and they've been giving him oxygen this morning. Yesterday he was desperately anxious to see you both."

"Is it possible or judicious to go to him now?" asked Clementina.

"You may inquire. If you will allow me, I'll show you the way to his room."

He led the way to the lift. They entered. For Quixtus his companions had ceased to exist. He was conscious only of going to the dying man, and the dynamo throbbed, throbbed. During the ascent Clementina said abruptly to Poynter:

"How long is it since you've been home?"

"Twenty-five years," he replied with a grim smile. "And it has been the dream of my life for ten."

"And you've stopped off in this Hades of a place for the sake of a sick stranger? You must be a good sort."

"You would have done the same," said Poynter.

"Not I."

He smiled again and looked at her with his calm, certain eyes. "A man does not live in the far Orient for nothing. I know you would. This way," he said, as the lift-door opened. He led them down a corridor, Quixtus following, a step or two behind, like a man in a trance.

The awful moment was at hand, the moment which, in the tea-shop and in the hotel, had seemed far, far distant, hidden in the mists of some unreal devil-land; which at dinner had begun to loom through the mists; which all night long had seemed to grow nearer and nearer with every rhythmic thud of the thundering train, until, at times, it touched him like some material horror. The moment was at hand. At last he was about to fulfil his destiny of evil. His enemy lay dying, the spirit faintly flapping its wings like the butterfly. In a moment they would enter a room. He would behold the dying man. He would curse him and send a blackened, anguished soul into eternity.

The dynamo in his brain and the beating of his heart made him fancy that they were walking to the sound of muffled drums. Nearer, nearer. This was real, actual. He was a devil walking to the sound of muffled drums.

Poynter and Clementina stopped before a door. Quixtus stood still, shaking all over, like a horse in front of a nameless terror.

"This is his room," said Poynter, grasping the handle.

Quixtus gave a queer cry and suddenly threw himself forward and clutched Poynter's arm convulsively, his features distorted with terror.

"Wait—wait! I can't do it! I can't do it! It's monstrous!"

He leaned up against the wall and closed his eyes.

"Overwrought nerves," whispered Poynter.

There happened to be a bench near by, placed for the convenience of the chambermaid of the floor. Clementina made him sit down.

"I don't think you're quite up to seeing him just now," she said.

He shook his head. "No. Not just now. I feel faint. It's death. I'm not used to death. You go in. Give him my love. I'll see him later. But give him my love."

"Very well," said Clementina.

She rapped gently at the door. It was opened and a sister of charity in a great white coif appeared on the threshold.

She looked at the visitors sadly.

"*C'est fini,*" she whispered.

Quixtus staggered to his feet.

"Dead?"

"*Oui, Monsieur.*"

The sweat broke out in great drops on his forehead.

"Dead!" he repeated.

"*Vous pouvez entrer si vous voulez,*" said the sister.

Then Quixtus reeled as if some one had dealt him a crushing blow. Poynter saved him from falling and guided him to the seat. For a long, long second all was darkness. The dynamo stopped suddenly. Then, as had happened once before, a little thread seemed to snap in his brain. He opened his eyes feeling sick and giddy. The sister quickly disappeared into the room, and returned with some brandy. The others stood

anxiously by. Presently the spirits took effect and enabled him to co-ordinate his faculties. With an effort of will he rose and straightened himself.

"I am better now. Let us go in."

"Wiser not," said Clementina, a thousand miles from suspecting the psychological phenomenon that had occurred.

Quixtus slightly raised a protesting hand.

"I assure you there is no reason why I should not go in," he said in a shaky voice.

"All right," said Clementina. "But you can't go tumbling all over the place."

Once more she took his arm in her strong grip, and, leaving Poynter outside, they entered the death-chamber together. The windows were flung wide, but the outside shutters were closed, darkening the room and cooling it from the baking sun. A man in a frock coat and narrow black tie—the doctor—was aiding his assistant in the repacking of the oxygen apparatus. On the bed, gaunt, hollow-cheeked, and pinched, lay all that was left of Hammersley. Only his blonde hair and beard, with scarcely a touch of grey, remained of that which was familiar. The laughing eyes which had charmed men and women were hidden forever beneath the lids. Clementina's hand crept half-mechanically downwards and clasped that of Quixtus, which returned the pressure. So hand in hand they stood, in silence, by the death-bed.

At last Clementina whispered:

"Whatever may have been the misunderstanding between you, all is over now. May his sins be forgiven him."

"Amen," said Quixtus.

Tears rolled down Clementina's cheeks and fell on her bodice. The dead man had belonged to her youth —the dreary youth that had taken itself for grim, grey

eld. He had brought into it a little laughter, a little buoyancy, much strength, much comfort! all, so simply, so kindly. At first, in her fierce mood of revolt, she had rebuffed him and scorned his friendship. But he was one of the gifted ones who could divine a woman's needs and minister to them; so he smiled at her rejection of his offerings, knowing that she craved them, and presented them again and again until at last, worn out with longing, she clutched at them frantically and hugged them to her bosom. A generous gentleman, a loyal friend, a very help in time of trouble, he lay there dead before her in the prime of his manhood. She let the tears fall unchecked, until they blinded her.

A dry, queer voice broke a long silence, whispering in her ear:

"I told you to give him my love, didn't I?"

She nodded and squeezed Quixtus's hand.

The doctor stood by waiting till their scrutiny of the dead should be over. Clementina was the first to turn to him and to ask for information as to the death. In a few words the doctor told her. When she entered the room he had been dead five minutes.

"Who, Madame, you or this gentleman, is responsible for what remains to be done?"

"I am. Don't you think so, Ephraim?"

Quixtus bowed his head.

"I sent him my love," he murmured.

"And now," said the Sister of Charity, "we must make the *toilette du mort*. Will you have the kindness to retire?"

She smiled sadly and opened the door.

"There is a packet in the drawer for this lady and gentleman," said Poynter, who had stood waiting for them in the corridor.

"*Ah! bon,*" said the Sister. She crossed the room and returned with the packet, which she handed to

Clementina. It was sealed and addressed to them jointly. "To Ephraim Quixtus and Clementina Wing. To be opened after my death." Clementina stuffed it in the pocket of her skirt.

"We'll open it together by-and-by. Now we'd better go to our rooms and tidy up and have some food. Only a fool goes through such a day as is before us on an empty stomach. What's your number? I'll tell them to send you up some coffee and rolls."

He thanked her dreamily. She arranged a meeting at noon in order to go through the packet. They walked along the corridor, Poynter accompanying them. He proposed, it being convenient to them, to take the night train to Paris and home. In the meanwhile his services were at their disposal.

"I wish I could pack you off to Piccadilly by Hertzian wave, right away," said Clementina.

"It's Devonshire I'm longing for," said he.

They arrived at the lift door.

"You'll love it all the better for having played the Angel in Hades," said Clementina with moist eyes "Good-bye for the present."

She extended her hand. He took it, held it in a hesitating way. An expression of puzzledom came over his tanned, lined features.

"Are you going to your room now?"

"Yes," said Clementina.

"Pardon my presumption," said he, "but—but aren't you going to see the child?"

"Child?" cried Clementina. "What child?"

"Why—Mr. Hammersley's—didn't you know? She's here——"

"Here?"

"When you came into the vestibule, didn't you notice a little girl I was playing with—and a Chinese nurse——"

"Lord have mercy upon us!" exclaimed Clementina. "Do you hear that, Ephraim?"

"Yes, I hear," said Quixtus tonelessly. The conflict within him between Mithra and Ahriman had left him weak and non-recipient of new impressions. "Hammersley has a little daughter. I wasn't aware of it. I wonder how he got her. She must have a mother somewhere."

"The mother's dead," said Poynter. "From what I could gather from Hammersley, the child has no kith or kin in the world. That was why he was so desperately anxious for you to come."

Clementina peered at him with screwed-up monkey face, as if he were sitting for his portrait.

"It's the most amazing thing I've ever heard in my life!" She clapped her hand to her pocket. "And this sealed envelope? Do you know anything about it?"

"I do," said Poynter. "It contains a letter and a will. I wrote them both at his dictation ten days ago. The will is a properly attested document appointing Dr. Quixtus and yourself his executors and joint trustees of the little girl. A dear little girl," he added, with a touch of wistfulness. "You'll love her."

"God grant it!" cried Clementina fervently. "But what an old maid like me and an old bachelor like him are going to do with a child between us, the Lord Almighty alone knows."

Yet, as she spoke, the picture of the child—in spite of her preoccupation on entering the hotel, her sharp vision had noted the fairy fragility of the English scrap contrasting with the picturesque materialism of the fat Chinese nurse—the picture of the child enthroned on cushions (a feminine setting!) in the studio in Romney Place, flashed with acute distinctness be-

fore her mind, and some foolish thing within her leapt and stabbed her with a delicious pain.

Quixtus brushed his thinning hair from his forehead.

"I understand," said he faintly. "I understand that I am a trustee for Hammersley's daughter. I wasn't expecting it. I hope you'll not think it discourteous if I leave you? I'm not quite myself to-day. I'll go and rest."

He entered the lift which had been standing open for some time. There is not a feverish hurry in Marseilles hotels between steamers in June. Clementina with a gesture checked the lift-boy. The man must be looked after at once. She turned to Poynter.

"Like a dear good soul," she said, in her frank way, "go down and prepare the child for such a rough-and-tumble stepmother as me. I'll be with you in a few minutes. What's your number, Ephraim?" He showed her the ticket. "Two hundred and seventy?"

"*Au troisième, Madame.*"

The lift gate clicked. They mounted a couple of floors. The chambermaid of the *êtage* showed them into number two hundred and seventy. Then Clementina took command. In less than two minutes windows were opened and shutters adjusted, the waiter was despatched for coffee, the valet was unpacking and arranging Quixtus's personal belongings, and the chambermaid spreading the bed invitingly open. When Clementina was a lady, she behaved in the most self-effacing and early Victorian ladylike way in the world. But when she was Clementina and wanted to do things, she would have ordered the devil about like a common lackey, and boxed the ears of any archangel who ventured to interfere with her.

Quixtus, unprepared for this whirlwind ministration on the part of Clementina, whom he had hitherto re-

garded rather as an antagonistic principle than as a sympathetic woman, sat bolt upright on the edge of the sofa and looked on with an air of mystification. Yet, feeling weak and broken, he was content to let her tend him.

"Take off your clothes and go to bed," said Clementina, standing, hands on hips, in front of him. "For two pins I'd undress you myself and put you to sleep like a baby."

A wan smile flickered over his features.

"I'm very grateful to you for your kindness. Perhaps a little rest will bring mental adjustment. That's what I think I need—mental adjustment."

He repeated the words several times, and sat staring in front of him.

On the threshold Clementina turned and crossed the room again.

"Ephraim," she said, "I think if you and I had been better friends all these years there wouldn't have been so much of this adjusting necessary. It has been my fault. I'm sorry. But now that we have a child to bring up, I'll look after you. You poor man," she added, touching his arm very kindly and feeling ridiculously sentimental. "You must be the loneliest thing that ever happened." She caught up his suit of pyjamas and threw them by his side on the sofa. "Now, for God's sake, stick on these things and go to bed."

Downstairs, in the vestibule, she found Poynter with the little girl on his knees. The Chinese nurse sat like a good-tempered idol a few feet away.

"This is your new auntie," said Poynter, as Clementina approached.

The child slipped from his knees and looked up at her with timorous earnestness. She was fair, with the transparent pallor of most children born and bred in the East, a creature of delicate fragility and grace.

Clementina saw that she had her father's frank hazel eyes. The child held out her hand.

"Good morning, auntie," she said in a curiously sweet contralto.

Clementina took the seat vacated by Poynter, and drew the child towards her.

"Won't you give me a kiss?"

"Of course."

She put up her little lips. The appeal to the woman was irresistible. She caught the child to her and clasped her to her bosom, and kissed her and said foolish things. When her embrace relaxed as abruptly as it had begun, the child said:

"I like that. Do that again."

"Bless you, my darling, I could do it all day long," cried Clementina.

She held the child with one arm, the little face pillowed on her bosom, and with her free hand groped in her pocket for her handkerchief. This found, she blew her nose loudly and glanced at Poynter who was surveying the pair with his grave, wise smile.

"I'm sure you don't mind if I make a fool of myself," she said. "And I'm sure I don't."

CHAPTER XVII

FOR as much of the day as she could spare from the miserable formalities and arrangements attendant on the death of a human being, Clementina made a fool of herself over the child. It was a feminine scrap hungering for love, kitten-like in its demand for caresses. Contentedly nestling in Clementina's arms, she related, piecemeal, her tiny history. Her name was Sheila, and she loved her father, who was very ill. So ill that she had only been able to see him once since they had come off the ship. That was yesterday, and she had been frightened, for he said that he was going to mummy. Now mummy had gone to heaven, and when people go to heaven you never see them again. With a pang Clementina asked her if she remembered when her mummy went to heaven. Oh, yes. It was ever so long ago—when she was quite little. Daddy cried, cried, cried. She, too, would cry if daddy were to go to heaven. . . . Clementina thought it best to wait and accustom the child both to the idea of the eternal parting and to herself before breaking the disastrous news. But her heart was wrung. Sometimes Sheila revolted and clamoured to see him; but on the whole she showed herself to be reasonable and docile. She hugged to her side a shapeless and very dirty white plush cat, her inseparable companion. . . . They had lived in a big house in Shanghai, with lots of servants; but her father had sold it and sold all the furniture, and they were going to live in England for ever and ever.

England was a place all full of green trees and grass and cows and flowers. Did Clementina know England?

"Suppose daddy goes to heaven, would you like to come and live with me?" asked Clementina.

Sheila replied seriously that she would sooner live with her than with Na. Na was a new Na. Her old Na was in Shanghai. Her husband wouldn't let her come to England. Only Clementina would have to cuddle her to sleep every night, like her daddy. Na didn't cuddle her to sleep. She thought she didn't know how. Daddy, she repeated like a young parrot, had said that was the worst of getting a nurse who had never had children of her own. They were so darned helpless. Clementina winced; but she put her arm round the child again.

"You're not afraid of my not being able to cuddle you, Sheila?"

"Oh, you—you cuddle lovely," murmured Sheila.

Who was her mother? Clementina had no notion. Hammersley had never announced the fact of his marriage. The last time she had seen him was six years ago. The child gave herself out to be five and a half. Hammersley must have married just before leaving England. He had breathed not a word to anybody. But so had Will Hammersley acted all his life. He was one who gave and never sought; a man who received the confidence of all who knew him, and kept the secrets both of joy and sorrow of his own life hidden behind his smiling eyes.

One of the secrets—the dainty secret that lay in her arms—was out now; a fact in flesh and blood. And for the guidance of this sensitive wisp of humanity to womanhood she, Clementina, and Ephraim Quixtus were jointly responsible. It was a Puckish destiny that had brought their lives to this point of conver-

gence. With the dead man lying cold and stark upstairs, the humour of it appeared too grim for smiles. She wished that the quiet, capable man of wise understanding and unselfish heart, who had missed the express train at Brindisi that would have sped him swiftly to his longed-for Devonshire, and had come on to Marseilles with the sick stranger, had been appointed her coadjutor. Poynter could have helped her mightily with his kindly wisdom and his knowledge of the hearts and the ways of men, as he was helping her that day in the performance of the dreary duties to the dead. But Quixtus! He was as much of a child as the one confided to his care. Anxious, however, that Sheila should be prepossessed in his favour, she drew a flattering picture of the new uncle that would shortly come into her life.

"Is he your husband?" asked Sheila.

"Good Lord, no!" cried Clementina, aghast at the grotesque suggestion. "Whatever put that in your head, child?"

It appeared that Dora Smith, one of her little friends in Shanghai, had an uncle and aunt who were married. She thought all uncles and aunts were married.

"Do you think he'll like my frock?" asked Sheila.

The vanity of the feminine thing! Clementina laughed for the first time that dismal day.

"Do you think he'll like mine?"

Sheila looked critically at the soiled, ill-fitting blouse, and the rusty old brown skirt, and reddened. She paused for a moment.

"I'm sure he'll say that he does," she replied sedately.

Clementina caught a whimsical gleam in Poynter's eye.

"Oriental diplomacy!" she remarked.

He shook his head. "You're wrong. Go deeper."

Clementina flushed and stroked the child's fair hair. "I'm afraid I've got to learn a lot of things."

"In the most exquisite school in the world," said Poynter.

Quixtus came downstairs about four o'clock, pale and shaky, and found Clementina in the dark and stuffy writing-room of the hotel. She had petted the child to her afternoon sleep, about half an hour before, and had left her in the joint care of the Chinese nurse and the dirty white plush cat tightly clasped to her breast. She had just finished a letter to Tommy. Either through the fault of the deeply encrusted hotel pen, or by force of painting habit, a smear of violet ink ran a comet's course across her cheek. She had written to Tommy:

"If you don't want to know what has happened, you ought to. I find my poor friend dead on my arrival. Elysian fields for him, which I'm sure are not as beautiful as the English lanes his soul longed for. To my amazement he has left a fairy child to the joint guardianship of your uncle and myself. Your uncle's a sick man, and needs looking after. What I'm going to do with all you helpless chickens, when I ought to be painting trousers, God alone knows. I once was an artist. Now I'm a hen. Yours, Clementina."

She had also written to Etta in similar strain, and at the same inordinate length, and was addressing the envelope when Quixtus entered the room.

She wheeled round.

"Better?"

"Thank you," said he. "Though I'm ashamed of myself for sleeping all this time."

"Jolly good thing you did go to sleep," replied Clementina. "It has probably saved you from a breakdown. You were on the verge of one."

"Can I help you with any of the unhappy arrangements that have to be made in these circumstances?"

"Made 'em," said Clementina. "Sit down."

Quixtus obeyed meekly. He wore an air of great lassitude, like a man who has just risen from a bed of sickness. He passed his hands over his eyes:

"There was a sealed packet, if I remember rightly, and a child. I think we might see now what the packet contains."

"Are you fit to read it?" she asked. He smiled vaguely, for her tone softened the abruptness of the question.

"I am anxious to do so," he replied.

Clementina opened the envelope and drew out the two documents, the letter and the will, and read them aloud. Neither added greatly to the information given by Poynter. Hammersley charged them as his two oldest, most loved and trusted friends, to regard themselves as the parents and guardians of his orphaned child, to whom he bequeathed a small but comfortable fortune, to be administered by them jointly in trust, until she should marry or reach the age of twenty-five years. No mention being made of the dead wife, her identity still remained a mystery. Like Clementina, Quixtus had not heard of his marriage, could think of no woman whom, six years ago, while he was in England, he could have married.

But six years ago. . . .! Quixtus buried his face in his hands and shuddered. Had the man been false to every one—even to the wife of the friend he had betrayed?

Suddenly he rose with a great cry and a passionate gesture of both arms.

"I am lost! I am lost! I am floundering in quicksands. The meaning of the earth has gone

from me. I'm in a land of grotesques—shapes that mop and mow at me and have no reality. The things they do the human brain can't conceive. They have been driving me mad, mad!" he cried, beating his head with his knuckles; "and yet I am sane now. Did you ever know what it was to be so sane that your soul was tortured with sanity? Oh, my God!"

He walked about the room quivering from the outburst. Clementina regarded him with amazed interest. This was a new, undreamed of Quixtus, a human creature that had passed through torment.

"Tell me what is on your mind," she said quietly. "It might ease it."

"No," he said, halting before her. "Not to my dying day. There are things one must keep within oneself till they eat away one's vitals. I wish I had never come here."

"You came here on an errand of mercy, and as far as you were concerned you performed it."

"I came here with hate in my heart, I tell you. I came here on an errand of evil. And outside the door of his room my purpose failed me—and I sent him my love. And then I went in and saw him—dead."

"And you forgave him," said Clementina.

"No; I prayed that God would."

He turned away. Clementina rose from her chair by the writing-table and followed him.

"What was between you and Will Hammersley?"

For an instant he had an impulse to tell her, she looked so strong, so honest. But he checked it. Confidence was impossible. The shame of the dead must be buried with the dead. He pointed to the documents lying on the table.

"He thought I never knew. I never knew," said he.

"I give it up," said Clementina.

A memory smote him. He bent his brows upon her. His eyes were sad and clear.

"You have no inkling of the matter?"

"None in the least. Good Lord!" she broke out impatiently, "if I had, do you suppose I'd be cross-questioning you? I'd be trying to help you, as I want to do."

He threw himself wearily into a chair and leant his head on his hand.

"I've had queer experiences of late," he said. "I've learned to trust nobody. How can I tell that you're sincere in saying you want to help me?"

Clementina puckered up her face.

"What's that? Here am I, who have been abusing you all your life, now doing violence to my traditions and saying let us kiss and be friends—just at the very moment when you want friends more than you ever did in your born days—and you ask me if I'm sincere! Lord in heaven! Did you ever know me to be even decently polite to creatures I didn't care about?"

Clementina was indignant. The faint shadow of a smile passed across Quixtus's face.

"You've not always been polite to me, Clementina. This change to solicitude is surprising. *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes.* Which means——"

"Do you suppose you're the only person who knows tags out of the Latin grammar?" she snapped. Then she laughed in her dry way. "Don't let us begin to quarrel. We've got a child, you and I. I hope you realise that. If we were its real father and mother we might quarrel with impunity. As we're not, we can't. What are we going to do?"

Quixtus thought deeply for a long time. His sensitive nature shrank from the duty imposed. If

he accepted it he would be the dead man's dupe to the end of the chapter.

"You have seen the little girl?" he inquired at last.

"Yes. Been with her most of the day."

"Do you like her?"

She regarded him with whimsical pity.

"Oh yes, I like her," she said.

"Then why not keep her to yourself? I am not bound by Hammersley's wishes. All I have to do is to decline to act either as executor or trustee."

Clementina's heart leaped in the most unregenerate manner. To have Sheila all to herself, without let or hindrance from her impossible co-trustee! She was staggered by the sudden, swift temptation which struck at the roots of her unfulfilled womanhood. For a while she dallied with it deliciously.

"If it's agreeable to you, I'll decline to act," said Quixtus, after the spell of silence.

Clementina strangled the serpent in a flash and cast it from her. To purchase happiness at the price of human infirmity? No. She would play squarely with life. Feminine instinct told her that the care of the child was needful for this weary man's salvation. She attacked him with more roughness than she intended—the eddy of her own struggle.

"What right have you to shirk your responsibilities? That's what you've always done—and see where it has landed you. I'm not going to be a party to it. It's pure and simple cowardice, and I have no patience with it."

"Perhaps I deserve your reproaches," said Quixtus mildly. "But the present circumstances are so painful——"

"Painful!" she interrupted. "Lord above, man, what does it matter whether they're painful or not?

Do you suppose I've gone through six and thirty years without pain? I've had awful pain, hellish pain, as much pain as a woman and an artist and a scarecrow can suffer. That's new to you, isn't it? But you've never seen me making a hullabaloo about it. We've got to bear pain in the world, and the more we grin, the better we bear it, and—what is a precious sight more useful—the more we help others to bear it. Who are you, Ephraim Quixtus, that you should be exempt from pain?"

She turned to the yellow packet of "Maryland" on the marble mantlepiece and rolled a cigarette. Quixtus said nothing, but sat tugging at his scrubby moustache.

"That child," she said—and she paused to lick the cigarette—"That child of five is doomed to pain. Some of it all the love in the world can't prevent. It's a law of life. But some it can. That's another law of life, thank God. By taking pain upon us, we can also save others pain. That's another law. I suppose we have to thank Jesus Christ for that. And fate has put this tender thing into our hands to save it, if possible, from the pain that both you and I have endured. To reject the privilege is the act of a cowardly devil, not of a man."

As she stood there in her slatternly blouse and tousled hair, brandishing the wetted cigarette between nicotine stained fingers, yet enunciating as she had seldom condescended to do to a fellow creature her ruggedly tender philosophy of life, she looked almost beautiful in the eyes of the man who had awakened from a nightmare into the sober greyness of an actual dawn.

She lit the cigarette with fingers unwontedly trembling, and feverishly drew in the first few puffs.

"Well? What are you going to do?"

Quixtus breathed hard, with parted lips, and stared at the future. It is difficult, after a nightmare madness, to adjust the mind to the sane outlook. But she had moved him to the depths—the depths that through all his madness had remained untroubled.

"You are right, Clementina," he said at last, in a low voice. "I will share with you this great responsibility."

She blew out a puff of smoke; "I don't think it ought to turn our hair white, anyhow," she said, sitting on the arm of the sofa. "The child's past teething, so we shan't have to sit up at nights over 'Advice to Mothers,' and our common sense will tell us not to fill her up every day with pâté de foie gras. When she's ill we'll send for a doctor, and when we want to do business we'll send for a lawyer. It strikes me, Ephraim, that having another interest in life besides dead men's jawbones, will do you a thundering lot of good."

"Would you like something to do me good?" he asked, with a touch of wistful banter.

Clementina, as she afterwards confessed, felt herself to be on such a sky-high plane of self-abnegation and altruism, that she thrust down, figuratively speaking, angelic arms towards him. Really, the mothering instinct again clamoured. She threw her half-smoked cigarette away and came and, standing over him, clutched his shoulder.

"My good Ephraim," she said, "I would give anything to see you a happy human being."

Then, in her abrupt fashion, she sent him out to take the air. That also would do him good. She thrust his hat and stick in his hand.

"What are you going to do, Clementina?" he asked.

"A thousand things. First I must go upstairs and

see whether the child's awake. I hate trusting her with that heathen imbecile."

"Au revoir, then," said Quixtus, moving away.

"Come back in good time to make the child's acquaintance," she shouted after him.

He paused on the threshold and looked at her irresolutely. He had a nervous dread of meeting the child.

He walked through the sun-filled streets, down the Cannebière, absently watched the baking quays, and then, returning to the main thoroughfare, sat down beneath the awning of a café. An hour passed. It was time to go back and see his ward. He shrank morbidly from the ordeal. With a great effort he rose at last and walked to the hotel.

Clementina, Poynter, and the child were in the vestibule, the two elders seated in the wickerwork chairs, the little one squatting on the ground at their feet and playing with the mongrel and somewhat supercilious dog of the hotel. Quixtus halted in front of the group. The child lifted her flower-like face to the new-comer.

"Is this——" he began.

"This is Sheila," said Clementina. "Get up, dear, and say how d'ye do to your new uncle."

She held out her hand with shy politeness—he looked so long and gaunt, and towered over her tiny self.

"How do you do, uncle—uncle——?" she turned to Clementina.

"Ephraim," she prompted.

"Uncle Ephraim."

"No wonder the poor innocent doesn't remember such a name," said Clementina.

He bent and solemnly wagged the soft hand for some time; then, not knowing what to do with it, he let it go.

"Do you know Bimbo?"

"No," said Quixtus.

"Bimbo—*patte.*"

The mongrel lifted his paw.

"You must shake hands with him and then you will know him," she said seriously.

Quixtus, with a grave face, bent lower and shook hands with the dog.

"And Pinkie."

She lifted the dirty white plush cat. In an embarrassed way he wagged a stumpy fore-foot.

Sheila turned to Clementina. "Now he knows everybody."

Clementina kissed her and rose from her seat, Poynter rising also.

"You'll be a good girl if I leave you with Uncle Ephraim for a while?"

"My dear Clementina!" cried Quixtus aghast. "What do you mean?"

A gleam of kind malice flickered in her eyes.

"I find I must have some air, in my turn—and some absinthe which Mr. Poynter has promised to give me. Au revoir! I shan't be long, Sheila dear."

She moved with Poynter towards the door.

"But, Clementina——"

"If she bites you've only to call that lump of Celestial idiocy over there," pointing to the fat Chinese nurse who sat smiling in her dark corner. "You're protected. And, by the way," she added in a whisper, "She doesn't know her father's dead yet. Leave it to me to break the news."

She was gone. Quixtus sank, a perspiring embarrassment, into one of the wicker chairs. A scurvy trick, he thought, of Clementina to leave him in this appalling situation. Yet shame prevented flight. He sat there bending his mild, china-blue eyes on

Sheila, who had returned unconcernedly to Bimbo, putting him through his tricks. He gave his paw and sat up on end, and while doing so yawned in a bored fashion. During this latter posture Sheila sat up on her little haunches and held her hands in front of her and yawned in imitation. Then she set Pinkie on end facing the dog. Lastly she looked up at her new uncle.

"You do that too. Then we'll all be doing it."

"God bless my soul," said the startled man. "I—I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm too old."

She seemed, for the moment, satisfied with the reason and resumed her game with Bimbo. After the yawn he grinned with doggy fatuity, and his red long tongue lolled from the corner of his mouth. Sheila stuck out her little red tongue, in droll mimicry.

"Don't wag your tail, Bimbo. It isn't fair, because I've got no tail. Why haven't I a tail, Uncle Eph—Eph—Uncle Ephim?"

"Because you're a little girl and not a dog."

At that moment the plush cat, insecurely balanced, toppled over.

"God bless my soul," cried the little parrot, "you're too old, Pinkie."

"Sheila," said Quixtus, realising in a frightened way his responsibility. "Come here."

With perfect docility, she rose, and laid a hand on his knee. Bimbo, perceiving himself liberated from the boredom of mountebank duty, twisted himself up and snarled comfortably at fleas in the middle of his back.

"You mustn't say 'God bless my soul,' my dear."

"Why not? You said it."

There are instinctive answers in grown-ups, just as instinctive questions in children.

"Old people can say things that little girls mustn't —just as old people can sit up later than little girls."

She regarded him with frank seriousness.

"I know. Daddy says 'damn,' but I mustn't. I never say it. Pinkie said it once, and I put her in a dark, dark hole for twenty million years. It wasn't *really* twenty millions years, you know—it was only ten minutes—but Pinkie thought it was."

"She must have been very frightened," said Quixtus, involuntarily—and the echo of the words after passing his lips sounded strange in his ears.

"She got quite white," said Sheila. She picked up the shapeless animal. "She never recovered. Look!"

"She also lost one side of her whiskers," said Quixtus, inspecting the beast held within two inches of his nose.

"Oh no," she replied, getting in the most entangling way between his legs. "Pinkie's a fairy princess, and one day she'll have a crown and a pink dress and a gold sword. It's a wicked fairy that keeps her like a cat. And it was the wicked fairy in the shape of a big rat, bigger than twenty million, billion, hillion houses, that bit off her whiskers. Daddy told me."

Quixtus could not follow these transcendental flights of faërie. But he had to make some reply, as she was looking with straight challenge into his eyes. To his astonishment, he found himself expressing the hope that, when Pinkie came into her own again, the loss of one set of whiskers would not impair her beauty. Sheila explained that princesses didn't have whiskers, so no harm was done. The bad fairy in the form of a rat wanted to bite off Pinkie's nose, in which case her beauty would have been ruined;

but Pinkie was protected by a good fairy, and just when the bad fairy was going to bite off her nose, the good fairy shook a pepper pot and the bad fairy sneezed and was only able to bite off the whiskers.

"That was very fortunate for Pinkie," said Quixtus.

"Very," said Sheila. She stood against him on one leg, swinging the other. Conversation came to a standstill. The man found himself tongue-tied. All kinds of idiotic remarks came into his head. He dismissed them as not being suitable to the comprehension of a child of five. His fingers mechanically twisted themselves in her soft hair. Presently came the eternal command of childhood.

"Tell me a story."

"Good gracious!" said he, "I'm afraid I don't know any."

"You *must* know little Red Riding-Hood," she said, with a touch of scorn.

"Perhaps I do. I wonder," said Quixtus. He clutched eagerly at a straw. "But what's the use of my telling it to you if you know it already?"

She ran and picked up the sprawling cat and calmly established herself on his knees. Bimbo, neglected, uttered a whining growl, and curling himself up with his chin by his tail, dropped into a morose slumber.

"Tell it to Pinkie. She's stupid and always forgets the stories. Now begin."

Quixtus hummed and ha'd and at last plunged desperately. "There was once a wolf who ate up Red Riding-Hood's grandmother."

"That's not it," cried Sheila. "There was once a sweet little girl who lived with her grandmother. That's the proper way."

Quixtus floundered. Let any one who has never told a tale to a child and has never heard of Red

Riding-Hood for at least five-and-thirty years, try to recount her tragical history. Quixtus had to tell it to an expert in the legend, a fearsome undertaking. At last, with her aid he stumbled through. Pinkie, staring at him through her bead eyes, evidently couldn't make head or tail of it. Being punched in the midriff by her young protectress, she emitted a wheezy squeak.

"Pinkie says 'thank you,'" Sheila remarked politely.

"And what do you say?" asked the blundering elder.

Now what had been good enough to merit Pinkie's thanks had not been good enough to merit hers. Besides, such as it was, she had told half the story. With delicate diplomacy she had handled a difficult situation. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Good God!" murmured Quixtus in terror. "She is going to cry. What on earth can I do?"

His wits worked quickly. He remembered a recent sitting in the Folk-lore section of the Anthropological Congress.

"I suppose, my dear, a story current among the aborigines of Papua wouldn't interest you?"

Her eyes dried magically. She snuggled up against him.

"Tell me."

So Quixtus began a story about serpents and tigers and shiny copper-coloured children, and knowing the facts of the folk tale, gradually grew interested and unconsciously discovered a new talent for picturesque narration. One story led to another. He forgot himself and his wrongs, and pathetically strove to interest his audience and explain to her childish mind the significance of tribal mysteries which were woven into the texture of the tales. The explanation left her

comparatively cold; but so long as there were tigers whose blood-curdling ferocity she adored, she found the story entrancing.

"There!" said he, laughing, when he had come to an end. "What do you think of that?"

"It's booful," she cried, and clambering on to both knees on his lap, she put both hands on his shoulders and held up her mouth for a kiss.

In this touching attitude Clementina and Poynter discovered them. The new-comers exchanged a whimsical glance of intelligence.

"Wise woman," Poynter murmured.

"Obvious to any fool," she retorted—and advanced further into the vestibule. "Feeling decidedly better?"

Quixtus blushed in confusion. Sheila clambered down from her perch and ran to Clementina.

"Oh, Auntie, Uncle Ephim has been telling me such lovely stories."

"Lord save us!"—she turned on him—"What do you know about stories?"

"They were tribal legends of Papua," he confessed, modestly.

"And what else have you been doing?"

Quixtus made one of his old-world bows.

"I've been falling in love."

"You're getting on," said Clementina.

CHAPTER XVIII

LET us take the case of a refined and sensitive man who has fallen, as many have fallen, under the influence of drink. Let us suppose him to have sunk lower and lower into the hell of it until delirium tremens puts a temporary end to his excesses. Let us suppose him to be convalescent, in sweet surroundings, in capable hands, relieved, for the time at least, by the strange gold drug of his craving for alcohol. His mind is clear, his perceptions are acute, he is once more a sane human being. He looks back upon his degradation with wondering horror. It is not as though he has passed through a period of dark madness of which the memory is vague and elusive. He remembers it all—all the incidents, all the besotted acts, all the benumbed, enslaved surrender of his soul. His freed self regards perplexedly the self that was in bondage. They are two different entities—and yet they are unquestionably the same. He has not been mad, because he has felt all the time responsible for his actions, and yet he must have been mad so to dishonour the divine spirit within him. The latter argument prevails. "I have been mad," he says, and shivers with disgust.

In some such puzzled frame of mind did Quixtus, freed from the obsession of the Idea, regard his self of the last few months. He remembered how it had happened. There had been several shocks; the Marrable disaster, the discovery of Angela and Hammersley's betrayal, that of the disloyalty of his

three pensioners, the cynical trick of his uncle. He remembered toying with the Idea on his homeward journey, the farcical faithlessness of the drunken housekeeper—and then, click ! the hag Idea had mounted on his shoulders and ridden away with him, as Al Kohol (the very devil himself) rides away with the unresisting drunkard. Every action, every thought of this strange period were clear in his memory. He could not have been mad—and yet he must have been.

To strain the analogy a trifle, the nightmare in the train and the horror of the morning had been his delirium tremens. But here the analogy suffers a solution of continuity. From that climax of devil work, the drunkard descends but slowly and gradually through tortures innumerable to the normal life of man. Shock is ineffective. But in Quixtus's case there was a double shock—the seismic convulsion of his being at the climactic moment, and the sudden announcement of that, which to all men born is the only Absolute, final, immutable.

And then click! the hag that had ridden him had been thrown from his shoulders, and he had looked upon the dead through the eyes of a sane man. And now, through the eyes of a sane man he regarded the incredible spectacle of his self of yesterday. He turned from it with shivers of disgust. He must have been mad. A great depression came upon him. He had suffered grievous wrongs, it is true ; no man since Job had been more sorely afflicted; the revelations of human baseness and treachery had been such as to kill his once child-like faith in humanity. But why had loss of faith sent him mad? What had his brain been doing to allow this grotesque impulse to over-master it? At the present moment, he assured himself, he had neither more nor less faith in mankind

than when he had walked a maniac through the London streets, or during last night's tortured journey in the train. Yet now he desired to permit no wickedness. The thought of evil for evil's sake was revolting. . . . The self that he had striven to respect and keep clean all his life, had been soiled. Wherein lay purification?

Had he been mad? If so, how could he trust his memory as to what had happened? By the grace of God those acts of wickedness whose contemplation he remembered, had been rendered nugatory. Even Tommy had not materially suffered, seeing that he had kept the will intact and had placed two thousand pounds to his banking account. But could he actually have committed deeds of wickedness which he had forgotten? Were there any such which he had committed through the agency of the three evil counsellors? He racked his memory in vain.

The time at Marseilles passed gloomily. Poynter, the good Samaritan, started the first evening for Devonshire to satisfy his hungry soul with the unutterable comfort of English fields. Clementina and Quixtus saw him off at the station and walked back through the sultry streets together. The next day he was left much to his own company, as Clementina broke the news of the death to the child and stayed with her for comfort. He wandered aimlessly about the town, seeking the shade, and wrapping himself in his melancholy. When he saw Sheila in the afternoon she was greatly subdued. She understood that her father had gone to Heaven to stay with her mother. She realised that she would never see him again. Clementina briefly informed Quixtus of the child's grief. How she had cried and called for him most of the morning, how she had fallen asleep and had awakened more calm. To distract her mind and to give

her the air, they hired a taxi-cab and drove on the Corniche Road past the Restaurant de la Réserve. Sheila's tiny body easily nestled on the seat between them, and she seemed comforted by the human contact. From Pinkie she also derived great consolation. Pinkie was stupid, she explained, and she couldn't talk; but really she was a fairy princess, and fairy princesses were always affectionate. Pinkie was stuffed with love as tight as she could hold.

"Have you ever been in a motor-car before?" asked Quixtus.

"Oh yes. Of course I have," she replied in her rich little voice. "Daddy had one in Shanghai. He used to take me out in it."

Then her lips quivered and the tears started and she flung herself weeping against Clementina.

"Oh, daddy! I want my daddy!"

The essential feminine in Clementina sprang to arms.

"Why did you start her off like this by talking of motor-cars?"

"I'm dreadfully sorry," said Quixtus. "But how was I to know?"

"Just like a man," she retorted. "No intuition worth a cent."

At dinner, a melancholy meal—theirs was the only table occupied in the vast, ghostly *salle à manger*—she apologised, in her gruff way.

"I was wrong about the motor-car. How the deuce could you have known? Besides, if you talked to the child about a triple-expansion boiler, her daddy would be sure to have had one at Shanghai. Poor little mite!"

"Yes, poor little mite," said Quixtus, meditatively. "I wonder what will become of her."

"That has got to be our look-out," she replied sharply. "You don't seem to realise that."

"I don't think I do quite—even after what you said to me yesterday. I must accustom myself to the idea."

"Yesterday," said Clementina, "you declared that you had fallen in love with her."

"Many a man," replied Quixtus with a faint smile, "has fallen in love with one of your sex and has not in the least known what to do with her."

The grim setting of Clementina's lips relaxed.

"I think you're becoming more human. And, talking of humanity—there's a question that must be cleared up between us, before we settle down to this partnership. Are you intending to keep up your diabolical attitude towards Tommy Burgrave?"

The question had been burning her tongue for over twenty-four hours; from the moment that he had appeared in the vestibule the day before, after his sleep, and seemed to have recovered from the extraordinary nervous collapse which had aroused her pity. With considerable self-restraint she had awaited her opportunity. Now it had come—and when an opportunity came to Clementina, she did not go by four roads to take it. Quixtus laid down his knife and fork and leaned back in his chair. Knowing her attachment to the boy, he had expected some reference to his repudiation. But the direct question disconcerted him. Should he have to render equally sudden account of all the fantastic iniquities of the past? Then something he had not thought of before entered his amazed head. He had never countermanded the order whereby the allowance was automatically transferred from his own banking account to Tommy's. He had intended to write the letter after having destroyed the will, but his reflections on plagiarism in wickedness which had led to the preservation of that document, had also caused him to forget

the other matter entirely. And he had not thought of it from that day to this.

"As a matter of fact," said he, looking at his plate, "I have not disinherited Tommy ; I have not discontinued his allowance, and I have placed a very large sum of money to his credit at the bank."

Clementina knitted her brows and stared at him. The man was a greater puzzle than ever. Was he lying ? If Tommy had found himself in opulence, he would have told her. Tommy was veracity incarnate.

"The boy hasn't a penny to his name—nothing except his mother's fifty pounds a year."

He met her black, keen eyes steadily.

"I am telling you the facts. He can't have enquired about his bank balance recently." He passed his hand across his forehead, as realisation of the past strange period came to him. "I suppose he can't have done so, as he has never written to acknowledge the—the large amount of money."

The man was telling the truth. It was mystifying.

"Then why in the name of Bedlam did you play the fool with him like that ?"

"That is another matter," said he, lowering his eyes. "For the sake of an answer, let us say that I wanted to test his devotion to his art."

"We can say it as much as we please, but I don't believe it."

"I will ask you, Clementina," said he, courteously, "as a great personal favour to let it pass at that."

"All right," said Clementina.

He went on with his dinner. Presently another thing struck him. He was to find a plaguey lot of things to strike him in connection with his lunacy.

"If Tommy was penniless," said he, "will you explain how he has managed to take this expensive holiday in France."

"Look here, let us talk of something else," she replied. "I'm sick of Tommy."

Visions of Tommy's whooping joy, of Etta's radiance, when they should hear the astounding news, floated before her. She could hear him telling the chit of a girl to put on her orange-blossoms and go out with him at once and get married. She could hear Etta say:

"Darling Clementina, do run out and buy me some orange-blossoms." Much the two innocents cared for darling Clementina! There were times when she really did not know whether she wanted to take them both in her arms in a great splendid hug, or tie them up together in a sack and throw them into the Seine.

"I'm sick of Tommy," she declared.

But the normal brain of the cultivated man had begun to work.

"Clementina," said he, "it is you that have been paying Tommy's expenses."

"Well, suppose I have?" she replied, defiantly. She added quickly, womanlike divining the reproach to Tommy, underlying Quixtus's challenge: "He's a child and I'm an old woman. I had the deuce's own job to make him accept. I couldn't go careering about France all by myself—I could, as a matter of practical fact—I could career all over Gehenna if I chose—but it wouldn't have been gay. He sacrificed his pride to give me a holiday. What have you to say against it?"

A flush of shame mounted to Quixtus's cheek. It was intolerable that one of his house—his sister's son—should have been dependent for bread on a woman. He himself was to blame.

"Clementina," said he, "this is a very delicate matter, and I hope you won't misjudge me; but as your

great generosity was based on a most unhappy misunderstanding——"

"Ephraim Quixtus," she interrupted, seeing whither he was tending, "go on with your dinner and don't be a fool!"

There was nothing for it but for Quixtus to go on with his dinner.

"I tell you what," she said, after a pause, in spite of her weariness of Tommy as a topic of conversation, "when Tommy met you in Paris, he didn't know what you've just told me. He thought you had unreasonably and heartlessly cut him adrift. And yet he greeted you as affectionately and frankly as if nothing had happened."

"That's true," Quixtus admitted. "He did."

"It proves to you what a sound-hearted fellow Tommy is."

"I see," said Quixtus. "Well?"

"That's all," said Clementina. "Or if it isn't it ought to be."

Quixtus made no reply. There was no reply possible, save the real explanation of his eccentric behaviour; and that he was not prepared to offer. But Clementina's rough words sank deep in his mind. Judged by ordinary standards, his treatment of Tommy had been unqualifiable; Tommy's behaviour all that was most meritorious. In Tommy's case wherein lay the proof of the essential depravity of mankind? His gloomy faith received a shock which caused him exceeding discomfort. You see, if you take all the trouble of going mad for the sake of a gospel, you rather cling to it when you recover sanity. You are rather eager to justify to yourself the waste of time and energy. It is human nature.

After dinner she dismissed him. He must go out to a café and see the world. She had to look after

the child's slumbers, and write letters. Quixtus went out into the broad, busy streets. The Cannebière was crowded with gasping but contented citizens. On every side rose the murmur of mirth and cheerfulness. Solid burgesses strolled arm in arm with their solider wives. Youths and maidens laughed together. Swarthy workmen with open shirt-collars showing their hairy throats, bare-headed workgirls in giggling knots, little soldiers clinging amorously to sweethearts—all the crowd wore an air of gaiety, of love of their kind, of joy in comradeship. At the thronged cafés, too, men and women found comfort in the swelter of gregariousness. Night had fallen over the baking city, and the great thoroughfare blazed in light—from shop windows, cafés, street lamps, from the myriad whirling lamps of trams and motors. Above it all the full moon shone splendid from the intense sky of a summer night. Quixtus and the moon appeared to be the only lonely things in the Cannebière.

He wandered down to the quay and back again in ever-growing depression. He felt lost, an alien among this humanity that clung together for mutual happiness ; he envied the little soldier and his girl gazing hungrily, their heads almost touching, into a cheap jeweller's window. A sudden craving such as he had never known in his life, awoke within him, insistent, imperious—a craving for human companionship. Instinctively he walked back to the hotel, scarcely realising why he had come, until he saw Clementina in the vestibule. She had stuck on her crazy hat and was pulling on her white cotton gloves, evidently preparing to go out.

"Hullo ! Back already ?"

"I have come to ask you a favour, Clementina," said he. "Would it bore you to come out with me—to give me the pleasure of your company ?"

"It wouldn't bore me," replied Clementina. "Precious few things do. But what on earth can you want me for?"

"If I tell you, you won't mock at me?"

"I only mock at you, as you call it, when you do idiotic things. Anyhow, I won't now. What's the matter?"

He hesitated. She saw that her brusqueness had checked something natural and spontaneous. At once she strove to make amends, and laid her hand on his sleeve.

"We've got to be friends henceforth, Ephraim, if only for the child's sake. Tell me."

"It was only that I have never felt so dismally alone in my life, as I did in that crowded street."

"And so you came back for me?"

"I came back for you," he said with a smile.

"Let us go," said Clementina, and she put her arm through his and they went out together and walked arm in arm like hundreds of other solemn couples in Marseilles.

"That better?" she asked after a while, with a humorous and pleasant sense of mothering this curiously pathetic and incomprehensible man.

The unfamiliar tone in her voice touched him.

"I had no idea you could be so kind, Clementina. Yesterday morning, when I was ill—I can scarcely remember—but I feel you were kind then."

"I'm not always a rhinoceros," said Clementina. "But what am I doing that's kind now?"

He pressed her arm gently. "Just this,' said he.

Then Clementina realised, with an odd thrill of pleasure, how much more significance often lies in little things than in big ones.

They walked along the quay and looked at the island of the Château d'If standing out grim in the

middle of the moonlit harbour, turned up one of the short streets leading to the Rue de Rome, and so came into the Cannebière again. A table, just vacated on the outer edge of the terrace of one of the cafés, allured them. They sat down and ordered coffee. The little sentimental walk arm in arm had done much to dispose each kindly towards the other. Quixtus felt grateful for her rough yet subtle sympathy, Clementina appreciated his appreciation. The atmosphere of antagonism that had hitherto surrounded them had disappeared. For the first time since their arrival in Marseilles they talked on general topics. Almost for the first time in their lives they talked of general topics naturally, without constraint. Hitherto she had always kept an ear cocked for the pedant ; he for the scoffer. She had been impatient of his quietism ; he had nervously dreaded her brutality. Now a truce was declared. She forebore to jeer at his favourite pursuit, it not entering her head to do so; Quixtus, a man of breeding, never rode his hobby outside his ring, except in self-defence. They talked of music—a band was playing in the adjoining café. They discovered a common ground in Bach. Desultory talk led them to modern opera. There was a little haunting air, said he, in *Hans Joueur de Flûte.*

"This ?" cried Clementina, leaning across the table and humming it. "You're the only English creature I've come across who has ever heard of it."

They talked of other things—of travel. Her tour through France was fresh in her mind. Sensitive artist, she was full of the architecture. Wherever she had gone, Quixtus had gone before her. To her after astonishment, for she was too much interested in the talk to consider it at the time, he met her sympathetically on every point.

"The priceless treasures of France," said he, "are the remains of expiring Gothic and the early Renaissance. Of the former you have the Palais de Justice at Rouen—which everybody knows—and the west front of the Cathedral at Vendôme."

"But I've just been to Vendôme!" cried Clementina. "That wonderful flamboyant window!"

"The last word of Gothic," said Quixtus. "The funeral pyre of Gothic—that tracery—the whole thing is on fire—it's all leaping flame—as if some God had said 'Let this noble thing that is dead have a stupendous end.' Vendôme always seems to me like the end of the Viking. They sent the hero away to sea in a blaze of fire."

Richelieu, the little town not far from Tours where every one goes, yet so unknown—built by the great Cardinal for his court and to-day standing with hardly change of stick or stone, just as Richelieu left it, Quixtus had visited.

"But that's damnable!" cried Clementina. "I thought we had discovered it."

He laughed. "So did I. And I suppose everybody who goes there views it with the eyes of a little Columbus."

"What did you like best about it?"

"The pictures of the past it evoked. The cavalcade of Richelieu's nobles—all in their Louis Treize finery—the clatter of the men-at-arms down that broad, cobble-paved central street. The setting was all there. It was so easy to fill it."

"That's just what Tommy did," said Clementina. "Tommy made a fancy sketch on the spot of the Cardinal entering in state in his great heavy *carrosse* with his bodyguard around him."

This led them on to pictures. She found that

he was familiar with all the galleries in Europe—with most of the works of the moderns. She had never suspected that he had ideas of his own on pictures. He hated what he called the "nightmare of technique" of the ultra-modern school. Clementina disliked it also. "All great art was simple," he remarked. "Put one of Hobbema's sober landscapes, the Saint Michael of Raphael, amidst the hysteria of the Salon des Indépendents, and the four walls would crumble into chaotic paint.

"Which reminds me," said he, "of a curious little experience a good many years ago. It was at the first International Art Exhibition in London. Paris and Belgium and Holland poured out their violences to unfamiliar eyes—mine were unfamiliar, at any rate. There were women sitting in purple cafés with orange faces and magenta hair. There were hideous nudes with muscles on their knee-caps, writhing in decadent symbolism. There were portraits so flat that they gave you the impression of insects squashed against the wall. I remember going through, not understanding it one bit ; and then in the midst of all this fever I came across a little gem—so cool, so finished, so sane, and yet full of grip, and I stood in front of it until I got better and then went away. It was a most curious sensation, like a cool hand on a fevered brow. I happened not to have a catalogue, so I've never known the painter."

"What kind of a picture was it?" asked Clementina.

"Just a child, in a white frock and a blue sash, and not a remarkably pretty child either. But it was a delightful piece of work."

"Do you remember," she asked, "whether there was a mother-o'-pearl box on a little table to the left of the girl ?"

"Yes," said Quixtus. "There was. Do you know the picture?"

Clementina smiled. She smiled so that her white, strong teeth became visible. Quixtus had never seen Clementina's teeth.

"Painted it," said Clementina, throwing forward both her hands in triumph.

One of her hands met the long glass of coffee and sent it scudding across the table. Quixtus instinctively jerked his chair backward, but he could not escape a great splash of coffee over his waistcoat. Full of delight, gratitude, and dismay, Clementina whipped up her white cotton gloves and before waiters with napkins could intervene, she wiped him comparatively dry.

"Your gloves! Your gloves!" he cried, protesting.

She held up the unspeakable things and almost laughed as she threw them on the pavement, whence they were picked up carefully by a passing urchin—for nothing is wasted in France.

"I would have wiped you clean with my—well, with anything I've got, in return for you having remembered my picture."

"Well," said he, "the compliment being quite unconscious, was all the more sincere."

The waiter mopped up the flooded table.

"Let us be depraved," said Clementina in high good humour, "and have some green chartreuse."

"Willingly," smiled Quixtus.

So they were depraved.

And when Clementina went to bed she wondered why she had railed at Quixtus all these years.

CHAPTER XIX

CLEMENTINA went to bed a happier woman than she had been for many a day. Distrusting the ministrations of the Chinese nurse, she had set up a little bed for Sheila in her own room. The child lay there fast asleep, the faithful Pinkie projecting from a folded arm in a staring and uncomfortable attitude of vigilance. Clementina's heart throbbed as she bent over her. All that she had struggled for and had attained, mastery of her art, fame and fortune, shrank to triviality in comparison with this glorious gift of heaven. She remembered scornful words she had once spoken to Tommy : "Woman has always her sex hanging round the neck of her spirit." She recognised the truth of the saying and thanked God for it. She undressed very quietly and walked about the room in stocking-feet, feeling a strange sacredness in the presence of the sleeping child.

She was happier, too, in that she had forgiven Quixtus; for the first time since she had known him she felt a curiosity regarding him, a desire for his friendship ; scarcely formulated, arose a determination to bring something vital into his life. As the notable housewife entering a forlorn man's neglected house longs to throw open windows, shake carpets, sweep down cobwebs, abolish dingy curtains, and fill the place with sunlight and chintz and other gaiety, so did Clementina long to sweep and garnish Quixtus's dusty heart. He had many human possibilities. After all, there must be something sound in a man who had

treasured in his mind the memory of her picture. Sheila and herself, between them, would transform him into a gaunt angel. She fell asleep smiling at the thought.

Clementina did not suffer fools gladly. That was why, thinking Quixtus a fool, she had not been able to abide him for so many years. And that was why she could not abide the fat Chinese nurse, who showed herself to be a mass of smiling incompetence. "The way she washes the child makes me sick," she declared. "If I see much more of her heathen idol's grin, I'll go mad and bite her." So the next day Clementina, with Quixtus as a decorative adjunct, hunted up consular and other authorities and made with them the necessary arrangements for shipping her off to Shanghai, for which she secretly pined, by the next outward-bound steamer. When they got to London she would provide the child with a proper Christian nurse, who would bring her up in the fear of the Lord and in habits of tidiness ; and in the meanwhile she herself would assume the responsibility of Sheila's physical well-being.

"I'm not going to have a flighty young girl," she remarked. "I could tackle her, but you couldn't."

"Why should I attempt to tackle her ?" asked Quixtus.

"You'll be responsible for the child when she stays in Russell Square."

"Russell Square ?" he echoed.

"Yes. She will live partly with you and partly with me—three months with each of us, alternately. Where did you expect the child to live ?"

"Upon my soul," said he, "I haven't considered the matter. Well—well——"

He walked about the vestibule, revolving this new and alarming proposition. To have a little girl of

five planted in his dismal, decorous house—what in the world should he do with her? It would revolutionise his habits. Clementina watched him out of a corner of her eye.

"You didn't suppose I was going to have all the worry, did you?"

"No, no," he said hastily. "Of course not. I see I must share all responsibilities with you. Only—won't she find living with me rather dull?"

"You can keep a lot of cats and dogs and rocking-horses, and give children's parties," said Clementina.

Sheila, who had been apparently absorbed in the mysteries of the Parisian toilet of a flaxen-haired doll which Clementina had bought for her at an extravagant price, cheerfully lifted up her face.

"Auntie says that when I come to stay with you, I'm to be mistress of the house."

"Indeed?" said Quixtus.

"And I'm to be a real lady and sit at the end of the table and entertain the guests."

"I suppose that settles it?" he said, with a smile.

"Of course it does," said Clementina, and she wondered whether his masculine mind would ever be in a condition to grasp the extent of the sacrifice she was making.

That day the remains of Will Hammersley were laid to rest in the little Protestant cemetery. The consular chaplain read the service. Only the two elders stood by the graveside, thinking the ordeal too harrowing for the child. Clementina wept, for some of her wasted youth lay in the coffin. But Quixtus stood with dry eyes and set features. Now he was sane. Now he could view life calmly. He knew that his memory of the dead would always be bitter. Reason could not sweeten it. It were better to forget. Let the dead past bury its dead. The dead man's child he would

take to his heart for her own helpless, sweet sake. Should she, in years to come, turn round and repay him with treachery and ingratitude, it would be but the way of all flesh. In the meanwhile he would be loyal to his word.

After the service came to a close he stood for a few moments gazing into the grave. Clementina edged close to him and pointed down to the coffin.

"He may have wronged you, but he trusted you," she said in a low voice.

"That's true," said Quixtus. And as they drove back in silence, he murmured once or twice to himself, half audibly :

"He wronged me, but he trusted me."

That evening they started for Paris.

Undesirous of demonstrative welcome at half-past eight in the morning, Clementina had not informed Tommy and Etta of the time of her arrival, and Quixtus had not indulged in superfluous correspondence with Huckaby. The odd trio now so closely related stood lonely at the exit of the Lyons Station, while porters deposited their luggage in cabs. Each of the elders felt a curious reluctance to part, even for a few hours, for they had agreed to lunch together. Sheila shed a surprised tear. She had adjusted her small mind to the entrance of her Uncle Ephraim into her life. The sudden exit startled her. On his promising to see her very soon, she put her arms prettily round his neck and kissed him. He drove off feeling the flower-like pressure of the child's lips to his, and it was very sweet.

It helped him to take up the threads of Paris where he had left them, a difficult task. Deep shame smote him. What could be henceforward his relations with Huckaby, whom, with crazy, malevolent intent, he had promised to maintain in the path of clean living ?

With what self-respect could he look into the eyes of Mrs. Fontaine, innocent and irreproachable woman, whose friendship he had cultivated with such dastardly design ? She had placed herself so frankly, so unsuspectingly in his hands. To him, now, it was as unimaginable to betray her trust as to betray that of the child whose kiss lingered on his lips. If ever a woman deserved compensation, full and plenteous, at the hands of man, that was the woman. An insult unrealised is none the less an insult; and he, Quixtus, had insulted a woman. If only to cleanse his own honour from the stain, he must make compensation to this sweet lady. But how ? By faithful and loyal service.

When he solemnly reached this decision I think that more than one angel wept and at the same time wanted to shake him.

And behind these two whom he would meet in Paris, loomed the forbidding faces of Billiter and Vandermeer. He shivered as at contact with something unclean. He had chosen these men as ministers of evil. He had taken them into his crazy confidence. With their tongues in their cheeks, these rogues had exploited him. He remembered loathsome scenarios of evil dramas they had submitted. Thank Heaven for the pedantic fastidiousness that had rejected them ! Billiter, Vandermeer, Huckaby—the only three of all men living who knew the miserable secret of his recent life ! In a rocky wilderness he could have raced with wild gestures like the leper, shouting " Unclean ! Unclean ! " But Paris is not a rocky wilderness, and the semi-extinct quadruped in the shafts of the modern Paris fiacre conveys no idea of racing.

Yet while his soul cried this word of horror, the child's kiss lingered as a sign and a consecration.

The first thing to do was to set himself right with

Huckaby. Companionship with the man on the recent basis was impossible. He made known his arrival, and an hour afterwards, having bathed and breakfasted, he sat with Huckaby in the pleasant courtyard of the hotel. Huckaby, neat and trim, and clear-eyed, clad in well-fitting blue serge, gave him the news of the party. Mrs. Fontaine had introduced him to some charming French people whose hospitality he had ventured to accept. She was well and full of plans for little festas for the remainder of their stay in Paris. Lady Louisa had found a cavalier, an elderly French marquis of deep gastronomic knowledge.

"Lady Louisa," said he with a sigh of relief and a sly glance at Quixtus, "is a charming lady, but not a highly intellectual companion."

"Do you really crave highly intellectual companions, Huckaby?" asked Quixtus.

Huckaby bit his lip.

"Do you remember our last conversation?" he said at last.

"I remember," said Quixtus.

"I asked you for a chance. You promised. I was in earnest."

"I wasn't," said Quixtus.

Huckaby started and gripped the arm of his chair. He was about to protest when Quixtus checked him.

"I want you to know," said he, "that great changes have taken place since then. I left Paris in ill-health, I return sound. I should like you to grasp the deep significance underlying those few words. I will repeat them."

He did so. Huckaby looked hard at his patron, who stood the scrutiny with a grave smile.

"I think I understand," he replied slowly. "Then Billiter and Vandermeer?"

"Billiter and Vandermeer I put out of my life for ever; but I shall see they are kept from want."

"They can't be kept from wanting more than you give them," said Huckaby, whose brain worked swiftly and foresaw blackmail. "You must impose conditions."

"I never thought of that," said Quixtus.

"Set a thief to catch a thief," said the other bitterly. "I'm telling you for your own good."

"If they attempt to write to me or see me, their allowances will cease."

He covered his eyes with his hand, as though to shut out their hateful faces. There was a short silence. Huckaby's lips grew dry. He moistened them with his tongue.

"And what about me?" he asked at last.

Quixtus drew away his hand with a despairing gesture, but made no reply.

"I suppose you're right in classing me with the others," said Huckaby. "Heaven knows I oughtn't to judge them. I was in with them all the time"—Quixtus winced—"but I can't go back to them."

"My treating you just the same as them won't necessitate your going back to them."

Huckaby bent forward, quivering, in his chair. "As there's a God in Heaven, Quixtus, I wouldn't accept a penny from you on those terms."

"And why not?"

"Because I don't want your money. I want to be put in a position to earn some honourably for myself. I want your help as a man, your sympathy as a human being. I want you to help me to live a clean, straight life. I kept the promise, the important promise I made you, ever since we started. You can't say I haven't. And since you left I've not touched a drop of alcohol—and, if you promise to help me, I swear to God I never

will as long as I live. What can I do, man," he cried, throwing out his arms, "to prove to you that I'm in deadly earnest?"

Quixtus lay back in his chair reflecting, his fingertips joined together. Presently a smile, half humorous, half kindly, lit up his features—a smile such as Huckaby had not seen since before the days of the hostless dinner of disaster, and it was manifest to Huckaby that some at least of the Quixtus of old had come back to earth.

"In the last day or two," said Quixtus, "I have formed a staunch friendship with one who was a crabbed and inveterate enemy. It is Miss Clementina Wing, the painter, whom you saw, in somewhat painful circumstances, the other day at the tea-room. I will give you an opportunity—I hope many—of meeting her again. I don't want to hurt your feelings, my dear Huckaby—but so many strange things have happened of late, that I, for the present, mistrust my own judgment. I hope you understand."

"Not quite. You don't mean to tell——"

Quixtus flushed and drew himself up.

"After twenty years, do you know me so little as that?"

"I beg your pardon," said the other humbly.

Again Quixtus smiled, at a reminiscent phrase of Clementina's.

"At any rate, my dear fellow," said he, "even if she doesn't approve of you, she will do you a thundering lot of good."

At the smile Huckaby took heart of grace; but at the same time the memory of Clementina, storming over the tea-table, for all the world like a French revolutionary general, filled his soul with wholesome dismay. Well, there was no help for it; he must take his chance; so he filled a philosophic pipe.

A little later Quixtus met the spotless flower of womanhood whom he had so grievously insulted. She greeted him with both hands outstretched. Without him Paris had been a desert. Why had he not sent her the smallest, tiniest line of news? Ah! She understood. It had been a sojourn of pain. Never mind. Paris, she hoped, would prove to be an anodyne. Only if she would administer it in the right doses, said Quixtus gallantly. Dressed with exquisite demureness, she found favour in his sight. He realised with a throb of thanksgiving that henceforward he could meet her on equal terms—as an honourable gentleman—no grotesque deviltry haunting the back of his mind and clouding the serenity of their intercourse.

"Tell me what you have been doing with yourself," she said, drawing him to a seat. The little air of intimacy and ownership so delicately assumed, captivated the remorseful man. He had not realised the charm that awaited him in Paris.

He touched lightly on Marseilles happenings, spoke of his guardianship, of Sheila, of her clinging, feminine ways, drew a smiling picture of his terror when Clementina had first left him alone with the child.

Mrs. Fontaine laughed sympathetically at the tale, and then, with a touch of tenderness in her voice that perhaps was not deliberate, said :

"In spite of the worries, you have benefited by the change. You have come back a different man."

"In what way ?"

"I can't define it."

"Try."

A quick glance met earnest questioning in his eyes. She looked down and daintily plucked at the sunshade across her lap.

"I should say you had come back more human."

Quixtus's eyelids flickered. Clementina had used

the same word. Was there then an obvious transformation from Quixtus *furens* to Quixtus sane ?

He remembered the child's kiss. " Perhaps it's my new responsibilities," he said with a smile.

" I should so much like to see her. I wonder if I ever shall," said Mrs. Fontaine.

" She is coming here to lunch with Miss Wing," replied Quixtus, eager now that his good friends should know and appreciate each other. " Won't Lady Louisa and yourself join us ? "

" Delighted," said Mrs. Fontaine. " Miss Clementina Wing is quite a character. I should like to see more of her."

Quixtus, his mind full of sweet atonement, did not detect any trace of acidity in her words.

On the stroke of one, the time appointed for luncheon, Clementina and Sheila appeared at the end of the long lounge, Tommy and Etta straggling in their wake. Quixtus rose from the table where his three friends were seated, and advanced to meet them. Sheila ran forward and he took her in his arms and kissed her.

" You didn't ask these children to lunch, but I brought 'em."

" They're very welcome," said Quixtus, smiling.

Tommy, his fair face aflame with joy, wrung his hand. " I told you I would look you up in the Hôtel Continental. By Jove ! I am glad to see you. I've been an awful ass, you know. Of course I thought——"

" Hush ! Hush ! " said Quixtus. " My dear Miss Concannon, I am delighted to see you."

" She goes by the name of Etta," said Tommy, proudly.

Clementina jerked her thumb towards them :

" Engaged. Young idiots ! "

"My dear Miss Etta," said Quixtus, taking the hand of the furiously blushing girl—"My friend, Tommy, is an uncommonly lucky fellow." He nodded at Sheila, who hung on to his finger-tips. "Have you made friends with this young lady?"

"She's a darling!" cried Etta.

"Clementina," said Tommy, "you're a wretch. You shouldn't have given us away."

"You gave yourselves away, you silly geese. People have been grinning at you all the time you were walking here." Then her glance fell upon the expectant trio a little way off. "Oh Lord!" she said, "those people again!"

"They're my very good friends," said Quixtus, "and I want you to meet them again in normal circumstances. I want you to like them."

He looked at her in mild appeal. Clementina's lips twisted into a wry smile.

"All right," she said. "Don't worry. I'll be civil."

So it came to pass that the two women again faced each other; Mrs. Fontaine all daintiness and fragrance in her simple but exquisitely cut fawn costume, the chaste contours of her face set off by an equally simple ten-guinea black hat with an ostrich feather; Clementina, rugged, powerful, untidy in her ill-fitting, mustardy brown stuff skirt and jacket, and heavy, businesslike shoes; and again between the two pairs of eyes was the flicker of rapiers. And as soon as they were disengaged and Clementina turned to Lady Louisa, she felt the other's swift glance travel from the soles of her feet to the rickety old rose in her hat. There are moments when sex gives a woman eyes in the back of her head. She turned round quickly and surprised the most elusive ghost of a smile imaginable. For the first time in her life Clementina felt herself at a disadvantage. She winced; then mentally, so as to

speak, snapped her fingers. What had she to do with the woman, or the woman with her ?

All the presentations having been made, Quixtus led the way to the restaurant of the hotel.

" Clementina," said he, " may I ask you to concede the place of honour for this occasion to my unexpected but most charming and most welcome guest ? "

He indicated Etta still blushing into whose ear Tommy whispered that his uncle always spoke like a penny book with the covers off.

" My dear man," said Clementina, " stick me anywhere, so long as it's next the baby and I can see that nobody feeds her on anchovies and lobster salad."

She understood perfectly. The second seat of honour was Mrs. Fontaine's. She confounded Mrs. Fontaine. But what was Mrs. Fontaine to her or she to Mrs. Fontaine ?

They took their places at the round table laid for eight. On Quixtus's right, Etta; on his left Mrs. Fontaine ; then Sheila, somewhat awed at the grown-up luncheon party and squeezing Pinkie very tight so as to give her courage ; then Clementina with Huckaby as left-hand neighbour ; then Lady Louisa, and Tommy next to Etta.

Clementina kept her word and behaved with great civility. Tommy politely addressed Lady Louisa to the immense relief of Huckaby, who thus temporarily freed from his Martha, plunged into eager conversation with Clementina about her picture in the Salon, which had attracted considerable attention. He did not tell her that, in order to refresh his memory of the masterpiece, he had revisited the Grand Palais that morning. He praised the technique. There was in it that hint of Velasquez which so many portrait-painters tried for and so few got. This pleased Clementina. Velasquez was the god of her art. One bright space

in her dreary youth was her life with Velasquez in Madrid.

"I too once tried to know something about him," said Huckaby. "I wrote a monograph—a wretched compilation only—in a series of Lives of Great Painters for a firm of publishers."

Hack work or not, the authorship of a Life of Velasquez was enough to prejudice her in Huckaby's favour. She learned, too, that he was a sometime Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and a university contemporary of Quixtus. Huckaby, finding her not the rough-tongued virago from whom Quixtus had always shrunk, and of whom, at their one meeting in the tea-room, he, himself, had not received the suavest impression, but a frank, intelligent woman, gradually forgot his anxiety to please and talked naturally as became a man of his scholarship. The result was that Clementina thought him a pleasant and sensible fellow, an opinion which she expressed later in the day to Quixtus.

With regard to Mrs. Fontaine, her promise of ladylike behaviour was harder to keep. All through the meal her dislike grew stronger. That Quixtus should bend towards Etta, in his courtly fashion, and pay her little gallant attentions, was but natural ; indeed it was charming courtesy towards Tommy's betrothed ; but that he should do the same to Mrs. Fontaine and add to it a subtle shade of intimacy, was exasperating. In the lady's attitude, too, towards Quixtus, Clementina perceived an air of proprietorship, a triumphant consciousness of her powers of fascination. When Quixtus addressed a remark across the table to Clementina, Mrs. Fontaine adroitly drew his attention to herself. Her manner gave Clementina to understand that, although a frump of a portrait painter might be an important person in a studio, yet in the big world out-

side, the attractive woman had victorious pre-eminence. Now Clementina was a woman, and one whose nature had lately gone through unusual convulsions. She found it difficult to be polite to Mrs. Fontaine. Only once was there a tiny eruption of the volcano.

Sheila's seat at the table being too low for her small body, Clementina demanded a cushion from the maître d'hôtel. When, after some delay, a waiter brought it, she was engaged in talk with Huckaby. She turned in time to see Mrs. Fontaine about to lift Sheila from her seat. With a sudden, rough movement she all but snatched the child out of the other's arms, and herself saw to Sheila's sedentary comfort.

She didn't care what Quixtus or any one else thought of her. She was not going to have this alien woman touch her child. The hussy flirtation with Quixtus she could not prevent. But no woman born of woman should come between her and the beloved child of her adoption.

The incident passed almost unnoticed. The meal ended pleasantly. With the exception of the two women in their mutual attitude, everybody was surprisedly delighted with everybody else. Etta thought Quixtus the very dearest thing, next to Admiral Concannon, that had ever a bald spot on the top of his head. Clementina, in a fit of graciousness, gave Huckaby the precious freedom of her studio. He could come and look at her pictures whenever he liked. Sheila, made much of, went away duly impressed with her new friends. Quixtus rubbed his hands at the success of his party. The apparently irreconcilable were reconciled, difficulties were vanishing rapidly, his path stretched out before him in rosy smoothness.

But Tommy's quick eyes had noticed the snatching of Sheila.

"Etta," said he, "I've known Clementina intimately

all these years, and I find I know nothing at all about her."

"What do you mean?" asked the girl.

"For the first time in my life," said he, "I've just discovered that the dear old thing is as jealous as a cat."

CHAPTER XX

"MY good children, I tell you we'll go by train," said Clementina, putting her foot down. "I don't care a brass button for the chauffeur's loneliness, and the prospect of his pining away on his journey back to London leaves me cold."

She had exhausted the delights of the car of thirty-five million dove-power, and was anxious to settle Sheila in Romney Place as quickly as possible.

"As for you two," she added, "you have had as big a dose of each other as is good for you."

Only one thing tempted her to linger in Paris—curiosity as to the sentimental degree of the friendship between the lady of her disfavour and Quixtus. That she was a new friend and not an old friend, the exchange of a few remarks with the ingenuous Lady Louisa had enabled her very soon to discover. Clementina looked askance on such violent intimacies. Quixtus, for whose welfare now she felt herself, in an absurd way, responsible, had not the constitution to stand them. The lady might be highly connected and move in the selectest of circles, but she had a hard edge, betraying what Clementina was pleased to call the society hack ; she was shallow, insincere ; talked out of a hastily stuffed memory instead of an intellect ; she had the vulgarity of good breeding, as noticeable a quality as the good-breeding of one in lowly station ; she was insufferable—an impossible companion for a man of Quixtus's mental equipment and sensitive or-

ganisation. There was something else about her that baffled Clementina, and further whetted her curiosity.

Neither was Clementina perfect, nor did she look for perfection in this compromise of a world. As an artist she demanded light and shade. "I wouldn't paint an angel's portrait," she said once, "for fifty thousand pounds. And if an angel came to tea with me, the first thing I should do would be to claw off his wings." Now, no one could deny the light and shade in Lena Fontaine. But there is such a thing as false chiaroscuro, and it offends and perplexes the artist. Lena Fontaine offended and perplexed Clementina.

Again, Clementina, with regard to the chambers of her heart, was somewhat house-proud. Very few were admitted ; but once admitted, the favoured mortal was welcome to stay there for ever. Now, behold an exasperating aggravation. She had just received Quixtus in the very best guest-room, and instead of admiring it and taking his ease in it, here he was hanging half-way out of window, all ears to a common hussy. If she had an insane desire to pull him back by the coat-tails, who can blame her?

No sensible purpose being attainable, however, by lingering in Paris, she gruffly sent temptation packing, and, with her brood under her wing, took the noon train from the Gare du Nord on the following day.

Quixtus was there, at the station, to see them off, his arms filled with packages. As he could not raise his hat when the party approached, he smiled apologetically, looking, according to Tommy, like Father Christmas detected at Midsummer. There was a great bouquet of orchids for Clementina (such a handy useful thing on the journey from Paris to London !) an enormous bonbonnière of sweets for Etta ; a stupendous woolly lamb for Sheila which, on something

being done to its anatomy, opened its mouth and gramaphonically chanted the "Jewel Song" from *Faust;* and a gold watch for Tommy.

The singing of the lamb, incautiously exploited on the platform, to Sheila's ecstasy, caused considerable dislocation of railway business. A crowd collected to see the gaunt, scholarly Englishman holding the apocalyptic beast in his arms, all intent on the rapture of the tiny flower-like thing standing open-mouthed before him. Even porters forgot to say "*Faites attention,*" and stopped their barrows, to listen to the magic song and view the unprecedented spectacle. It was only when the lamb bleated his last note that Quixtus became conscious of his surroundings.

"Good heavens!" said he.

"Do it again," said Sheila, in her clear contralto, whereat the bystanders laughed.

"Not for anything in the world, my dear. Tommy, take the infernal thing. My dear," said he, lifting Sheila in his arms, "if I know anything of Tommy, he will have that tune going for the next seven hours."

She allowed herself to be carried in seraphic content to the entrance of the car in which was the compartment reserved for the party. Tommy carrying the lamb, Clementina and Etta followed.

"That kid's a wonder," said Tommy. "She would creep into the heart of a parsnip."

Clementina, to whom the remark was addressed, walked three or four steps in silence. Then she said:

"Tommy, if I hear you say a thing like that again, I'll box your ears."

He stared at her in amazement. He had paid a spontaneous and sincere tribute to the child over whom she had gone crazy. What more could she want? She moved a step in advance, leaving him free to jus-

tify himself with Etta, who agreed with him in the proposition that Clementina for the last two days was in a very cranky mood. Very natural, the proposition of the two innocents. How could they divine that the moisture in Clementina's eyes had nothing whatsoever to do with Sheila's appreciation of the vocal lamb or her readiness to be carried by Quixtus ? How could they divine that, at the possibility of which the cruelty and insolence of youth would have caused them both to shriek with inextinguishable laughter? And how was Tommy, generous hearted lad that he was, to know that this one unperceptive speech of his sent him hurtling out of the land of Romance down to common earth ? Henceforward Tommy, whilst retaining his chamber in Clementina's heart, was to walk in and out just as he chose. Not the tiniest pang was he again to cause her. But what could Tommy know—what can you or I or any other male thing ever born know of a woman ? We walk, good easy men, with confident and careless tread through the familiar garden, and then suddenly terra firma miraculously ceases to exist, and head-over-heels we go down a precipice. How came it that we were unaware of its existence ? *Mystère !* Who could interpret the soul of La Giaconda ? Leonardo da Vinci least of all. It is all very well to give a man a vote ; he is a transparent animal, and you know the way the dunderhead is going to use it ; but the incalculable and pyrotechnic way in which women will use it will make humanity blink. Let us therefore pardon Tommy for staring in amazement at Clementina. He sought refuge in Etta. From Scylla, perhaps, to Charybdis ; but, for the present, Charybdis sat smiling under her fig-tree, the most innocent and bewitching monster in the world.

Leaving the three children in the compartment, Clementina and Quixtus walked, for the last few

moments before the train started, up and down the platform.

"I suppose you'll soon be coming back to London?" said Clementina.

"I think so," said he. "Now that the Grand Prix is over Paris is emptying rapidly."

"Parrot!" thought Clementina, once more confounding the instructress; but she said blandly: "What difference in the world can it make to you whether Paris is empty or not?"

He smiled good-naturedly. "To tell the honest truth, none. Yes. I must be getting home again."

"Of course there'll be a certain amount of worry over Hammersley's affairs," she said; "but I hope you've got something else to do to occupy your mind."

"I want to settle down to systematic work," replied Quixtus.

"What kind of work?"

"Well," said he, with an apologetic air, "I mean to extend my little handbook on 'The Household Arts of the Neolithic Age' into an authoritative and comprehensive treatise. I've been gathering material for years. I'm anxious to begin."

"Begin to-morrow," said Clementina. "And whenever you feel lonely come and read bits of it to Sheila and me."

And thus came about the surprising and monstrous alliance between Clementina and Prehistoric Man. Dead men's jawbones had some use after all.

"*En voiture!*" cried the guard.

"Good-bye, my dear Clementina," said Quixtus, "we have had a memorable meeting."

"We have indeed. You are sending away three very happy people."

"Why not four?"

But she only smiled wryly and said: "Good-bye,

God bless you. And keep out of mischief," and clambered into the train.

The train began to move, to the faint strains of the "Jewel Song" in *Faust,* and Sheila blew him kisses from the carriage window. He responded until the little white face disappeared. Then he thought of Clementina.

"The very best, but the most enigmatic woman in the world," said he.

Which was a very sweeping statement for a man of his scientific accuracy.

Entirely ignorant of the word of the enigma, he went back to the spotless flower of insulted womanhood, who took him off to lunch with her French friends. She welcomed his undivided homage. That fishfag of a creature, as she characterised Clementina in conversation with Lady Louisa, made her feel uncomfortable. Even now that she had gone, the problem of Quixtus's removal from her sphere of influence remained. The child was the stake to which he was fettered within that sphere. Could she break the chains? Therein seemed to lie the only solution—unless by audacity and adroitness she uprooted the stake and carried it, with Quixtus, chains and all, into her own territory.

She had a talk after lunch with Huckaby. The luncheon-party had broken up into groups of two or three, who wandered about the cool enclosure of the Bois de Boulogne restaurant where the feast had been given, and, half by chance, half by design, the two had joined company. Their conversation on the evening of Quixtus's departure from Paris had deeply affected their mutual relations. Each felt conscious of presenting a less tarnished front to the other, and each, not hypocritically, began to assume a little halo of virtue in the pathetic hope that the other would

be impressed by its growing radiance. During the few days of Quixtus's absence they had become friends and exchanged confidences. Huckaby convinced her of the sincerity of his desire to reform. He described his life. He had worked when work came his way—but work has a curious habit of shrinking from the drunkard's way ; a bit of teaching, a bit of free-lance journalism, a bit of hack compilation in the British Museum ; he had borrowed far and wide ; he had not been over-scrupulous on the point of financial honour. Hunger had driven him. Lena Fontaine shivered at the horrors through which he had struggled. All he desired was cleanliness in life and body and surroundings. She understood. Material cleanliness had been and would be hers ; but cleanliness of life she yearned for as much as he did. But for him, the man, with the given boon of honourable employment, it was an easy matter. For her, the woman, tired and soul-sick, what avenue lay open ? She, in her turn, told him of incidents in her career at which he shuddered. "Throw it up, throw it up," he counselled. She smiled bitterly. What could be the end of the bird of prey who assumed the habits of the dove ? She could marry, he replied, before it was too late. Marry, ay ! But whom ? She had not dared confide to him her hope. So close, however, being their relations, Huckaby had not failed to acquaint her with the important scope of his conversation with Quixtus the day before. Quixtus's changed demeanour, obvious to her at once, confirmed his announcement. She welcomed it with more joy than Huckaby could appreciate. For behind the pity that had paralysed beak and talon, the new-born hope and the curious liking she had conceived for the mild, crazy gentleman, stalked the instinctive aversion which the sane feel towards those whose wits have gone ever so little astray. The news

had come as an immense relief. Now she could meet him on normal ground. All was fair.

They found two chairs by a little table under a tree, at the back of the Châlet Restaurant and secluded from the gaiety and laughter of the front. Nothing human was in sight save, through the tall, masking acacias and shrubs, the white gleams of cooks and hurrying, aproned waiters.

"Let us sit," she said. "How good it is to get a little cool and quiet. This *vie de cabaret* is getting on my nerves. I'm weary to death of it."

Huckaby laughed. "It's still enough novelty to me to be pleasant."

She accepted a cigarette. They smoked for a while.

"How's goodness getting on?" she asked.

"By leaps and bounds daily. I'm becoming a fanatical believer in the copy-book. I'm virtuous. I'm happy. Industry is a virtue. My virtue is to be rewarded by industry. Therefore virtue is its own reward."

"What industry?"

"I'm going to collaborate with our friend in the new book he's talking about," replied Huckaby, with a surviving touch of boastfulness. "There is also a possibility of my taking over the secretaryship of the Anthropological Society."

"You're lucky," said Lena Fontaine.

"How's goodness with you?"

"The usual slump. Shares going dirt cheap. No one seems to have any use for virtue in a woman."

"Husbands seem to have, as I've already suggested to you."

"Have you any particular husband to suggest?"

He cast on her a glance of admiration, for in her outward seeming she was an object for any man's for-

givable desire, and he said in a tone not wholly of banter :

" The humble individual in front of you would have no chance, I suppose ? "

She laughed. " None whatever."

" You'll pardon my presumption in making the offer ; but could I, *en galant homme,* do otherwise ? "

" No," she replied, good-humouredly, " you couldn't. If you had five thousand a year, it would give me to think, for you're not unsympathetic. But as you haven't, I've no use for you—as a husband, *bien entendu.*"

It was a jest. They laughed. Presently a cloud obscured the sunshine of her laughter. She leaned over the table.

" Eustace Huckaby, are you or are you not my friend ? "

For once in her dealings with a man whose goodwill she desperately craved, she was sincere. She dropped the conscious play of glance and tone ; but she forgot the liquid splendour of her eyes and the dangerous nearness of her face to his.

" Your friend ? " he cried, laying his hand on her wrist. " Can you doubt it ? I am indeed. I swear it."

" Do you know why I'm staying here—apparently wasting my time ? "

" I've supposed something was up ; but my supposition seemed too absurd ! "

" Why absurd ? "

" Quixtus as a husband ? "

" Yes. Why not ? "

He released her wrist and fell back in his chair. He frowned and tugged at his beard.

" Do you care for him ? "

" Yes. In a way. I sincerely do. If you mean—have I fallen desperately in love with him ?—well, I

haven't. That would be absurd. It's not my habit to fall in love."

"What would you get out of it?"

She made an impatient gesture. "Rest. Peace. Happiness. He's a wealthy man and would give me all the comfort I need. I couldn't face poverty. And he would be kind to me."

"And he—pardon the brutality of my question—what would he get out of it?"

"I'm a lady, after all," she said, "and I know how to run a large house—and as a woman I'm not unattractive. And I'd run straight. Temperamentally I am straight. That's frank. Whatever impulses I've had within me with regard to running off the rails have been the other way. Oh, God, yes," she added, with a little shiver and averted eyes, "I'd run straight."

"What about ghosts of the past rising up and queering things?"

"I'd take my chance. I've bluffed myself out of tight places already, and I could bluff again."

Huckaby lit another cigarette. "He looks on you as a spotless angel of purity," said he. "If he married you on that assumption, and learned things afterwards, there would be the devil to pay. He's been hit like that already, and he went off his head. I shouldn't like him to have another experience. Why not tell him something—just a little?"

She raised both hands in nervous protest. "Oh, no, no. The woman who does that is a fool. It never comes off. Let him take me for what he thinks I am, and I'll see that I remain so. Trust me. It will be all right. You're the only impediment."

"I?"

"Of course. You have it in your power to give me away at any time. That's why I asked you whether you were my friend."

Huckaby tugged at his beard, and pondered deeply. He meant, with all the fresh energy of new resolve, to be loyal to Quixtus. But how could he stand in the way of a woman seeking salvation? Moral sense, however, is a plant of gradual growth. Huckaby's as yet was not adequate to the solution of the perplexing problem. Lena Fontaine held out her hand, palm upward, across the table.

"Speak," she said.

He took her hand and pressed it.

"I'll be your friend in this," said he.

She thanked him with her eyes, and rose.

"Let us go back to the others, or they'll think we're having a horrible flirtation."

On this and on the succeeding days she discovered a subtle change in Quixtus's attitude towards her. His manner had grown, if possible, more courteous; it betrayed a more delicate admiration, a more graceful homage to the beautiful and charming woman. Before his Marseilles visit she had found it an easy task to appeal to the fool that grins in every man. A trick of eyes and voice was enough to set him love-making in what she had termed the Quixtine manner. Now the task was more difficult. She found herself confronted by a greater sensitiveness that did not respond to the obvious invitation. He was up in the clouds, more chivalrous, more idealistic. With a sigh, she gathered her skirts together and climbed to the higher plane.

And all this on Quixtus's part was sheer remorse—atonement for the unspeakable insult. The thought of having dared to make coarse love to this exquisite creature filled him with horrified dismay. That the lady had appeared rather to like the coarse love-making he did not stop to consider. Certainly, in his crazy exultation, he had proclaimed her a fruit ripe to his

hand, but that was only an additional vulgarity which had stained that peculiar phase of his being. The result of the reaction was to accentuate the reverential conception of woman, which, by reason of a temperament dreamy and poetic and of a scholarly life remote from the disillusionising conflicts of sex, he had always entertained. He comported himself therefore towards her with scrupulous delicacy, resolved that not a word or intonation that could be construed into an affront should ever pass his lips.

The fine weather broke. Torrential rains swept Paris. The meteorologists talked learnedly about cyclonic disturbances in the Atlantic which would affect the weather adversely for some time to come. Lena Fontaine began to reflect. Summer Paris in rain is no place for junketing, even on the high planes. It offers to the visitor nothing but the boredom of hotel and restaurant. She knew the elementary axiom of sex relations, that the woman who bores a man is lost. The high planes were all right when you looked down from them on charming objective things ; but, after all, a man has to be amused, and fun on the high planes is a humour dangerously attenuated. She announced an immediate departure from Paris.

"If you would accept the escort of Huckaby and myself, we should be honoured," said Quixtus. "Unless, of course, we should be in the way."

She laughed. "My dear friend, did you ever hear of men being in the way when women were travelling? A lone woman is never more conspicuously lonesome than *en voyage*. All the other women around who have men to look after them look at one with a kind of patronising pity, as though they said : 'Poor thing that can't rake up a man from anywhere.' And it makes one want to scratch."

"Does it really ?" smiled Quixtus.

"It does." She laughed again and sighed. "A lone woman has much to put up with. Malicious tongues not the least."

"My dear Mrs. Fontaine," said he, "what tongue could be so malicious as to speak evil of you?"

"There are thousands in this gossipy world. Our little friendship and *camaraderie* of the last fortnight—sweetness and innocence itself—who knows what interpretation slanderers might put on it?"

Quixtus flushed, and drew his gaunt body to its full height. "I'm not pugilistic by habit," said he, "but if any man made such an insinuation, I should knock him down."

"It would be more likely a woman."

"Then," said he, "I think I could manage to convey to her, without brutality, that she was a disgrace to her sex."

She fluttered a glance at him. "I should like to have you always as a champion."

"If I understand the word gentleman aright," said Quixtus, "he is always the champion of the unprotected woman."

His tone assured her that this Early-Victorian sentiment was not mere gallantry. He meant it, indignant still at the idea of misconstruction of their friendship.

"I happen to be a woman," she said- "and seek the particular rather than the general. I said *my* champion, Dr. Quixtus. Now don't say that the greater includes the less, or I shall fall through the floor."

He was too much in earnest to smile with her in her coquetry.

"Mrs. Fontaine," said he, with a bow, "no one will ever dare speak evil of you in my presence."

She rose—they were sitting in the lounge-

"Thank you," she said, falling in with his earnest mood. "Thank you. I shall go back to London with a light heart."

And like a wise woman, she cut short the conversation, and went upstairs to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER XXI

JULY brought in halcyon days for everybody.

They were halcyon days for Clementina. There were neglected portraits to complete, new sitters for whom to squeeze in appointments, a host of stimulating things, not the least of which was the beloved atmosphere, half-turpentine, half-poetry, of the studio. Only the painter can know the delight of the mere feel of the long-forsaken brush, and the sight of the blobs of colour oozing out from the tubes on to the palette. Most of us, returning to toil after holiday, sigh over departed joys. To the painter the joy of getting back to his easel is worth all the joys that have departed. Clementina plunged into work as a long-stranded duck plunges into water. By rising at dawn, a practice contrary to her habit, she managed to keep pace with her work and to attend to the various affairs which her new responsibilities entailed. Her days were filled to overflowing, and filled with extraordinary happiness. A nurse was engaged for Sheila, a kind and buxom widow who also found herself living in halcyon days. She could do practically whatever she liked, as her charge was seldom in her company. The child had her being in the studio, playing happily and quietly in a corner, thus realising Clementina's dream, or watching her paint, with great, wondering eyes. The process fascinated her. She would sit for an hour at a time, good as gold, absorbed in the magic of the brush-strokes, clasping the dingy Pinkie tight against her bosom. Tommy appeared one day with

a box of paints, a miniature easel, and a great mass of uncoloured fashion-plates of beautiful ladies in gorgeous raiment. A lesson or two inspired Sheila with artistic zeal, so that often a sitter would come upon the two of them painting breathlessly. Clementina screwing up her eyes, darting backwards and forwards to her canvas, and the dainty child seated on a milking-stool and earnestly making animated rainbows of the beautiful ladies in the fashion-plates.

Then there was the tedious process of obtaining probate of Hammersley's will. Luckily, he had wound up all his affairs in Shanghai, to the common satisfaction of himself and his London house, so that no complications arose from the latter quarter. Indeed, the firm gave the executors its cordial assistance. But the London house had to be interviewed, and lawyers had to be interviewed, and Quixtus and all kinds of other people, and papers had to be read and signed, and affidavits to be made, and head-splitting intricacies of business and investments to be mastered. All this ate up many of the sunny hours.

Tommy and Etta had halcyon days of their own, which, but by the free use of curmudgeonly roughness, would have merged into Clementina's. Etta had cajoled an infuriated admiral, raving round the room after a horsewhip, into a stern parent who consented to receive Tommy, explicitly reserving to himself the right to throw him out of window should the young man not take his fancy. Tommy called and was allowed to depart peacefully by the front door. Then Quixtus, incited thereto by Tommy, called upon the Admiral with the awful solemnity of a father in a French play, with the result that Tommy was invited to dinner at the Admiral's and given as much excellent old port as he could stand. After which the Admiral called on Clementina, whom he had not met before.

During the throes of horsewhip hunting he had threatened to visit her there and then and give her a piece of his mind—which at that moment was more like a hunk of molten lava than anything else. But the arts and wiles of Etta had prevailed so that the above scheduled sequence of events had been observed. Clementina, caught in the middle of a hot afternoon's painting, received him, bedaubed and bedraggled, in the studio, whose chaos happened to be that day more than usually confounded. The Admiral, accustomed to the point-device females of his world, and making the spick and span of the quarter-deck a matter of common morality in material surroundings, went from Romney Place an obfuscated man.

"I can't make your friend out," he said to Etta. "I don't mind telling you that if I had seen her, I should never have allowed you to visit her. I found her looking more like a professional rabbit-skinner than a lady, and when I went to sit down I had to clear away a horrid plate of half-finished cold pie, by George, from the chair. She contradicted me flatly in everything I said about you—as if I didn't know my own child—and filled me up with advice."

"And wasn't it good, dear?"

"No advice is ever good. Like Nebuchadnezzar's food, it may be wholesome but it isn't good. And then she turned round and talked the most downright common sense about women I've ever heard a woman utter. And then, by Jove, I don't know how it happened—I never talk shop, you know——"

"Of course you don't, dear, never," said Etta.

"Of course I don't—but somehow we got on to the subject, and she showed a more intelligent appreciation of the state of naval affairs than any man I've met for a long time! As for those superficial theoretical donkeys at the Club——"

"And what else, darling?" said Etta, who had often heard about the donkeys, but now was dying to hear about Clementina. "Do tell me what she talked about. She must have talked about me. Didn't she?"

"About you! I've told you." He took her chin in his hand—she was sitting on a footstool, her arms about his knee.

"You can't have told me everything, dear."

"I think she informed me that her selection of a husband for you was a damned sight better than mine—I beg your pardon, my dear, she didn't say 'damned'—and then the little girl you're always talking of came in, and the rabbit-skinner seemed to turn into an ordinary sort of woman and took me up, and, in a way, threw me down on the floor to play with the child."

"What did you play at, dad? When I was little you used to pretend to swallow a fork. Did you swallow a fork?"

The iron features relaxed into a smile.

"I did, my dear, and it was the cold pie fork, wiped on a bit of newspaper. And last of all, what do you think she said?"

"No one on earth could guess, dear, what Clementina might have said."

"She actually asked me to sit for a crayon sketch. Said my face was interesting to her as an artist, and she would like to make a study of it for her own pleasure. Now what pleasure could anybody on earth find in looking at my ugly old mug?"

"But, dear, you have a most beautiful mug," cried Etta. "I don't mean beautiful like the photographs of popular actors—but full of strength and character—just the fine face that appeals to the artist."

"Do you think so?" asked the Admiral.

"I'm sure." She ran to a little table and brought a Florentine mirror. "Look."

He looked. Instinctively the man of sixty-five touched the finely-curving grizzled hair about his temples.

"You're a silly child," said he.

She kissed him. "Now confess. You had the goodest of good times with Clementina this afternoon."

"I don't mind owning," said the Admiral, "that I found her a most intelligent woman."

And that is the way that all of us sons of Adam, even Admirals of the British Fleet, can be beguiled by the daughters of Eve.

Halcyon days were they for Quixtus, for whom London wore an entirely different aspect from the Aceldama he had left. Instead of its streets and squares stretching out before him as the scene of potential deviltry, it smiled upon him as the centre of manifold pleasant interests. He had the great work to attack, the final picture that mortal knowledge could draw of that far off, haunting phase of human life before the startling use of iron was known to mankind. It was not to be a dull catalogue of dead things. The dead things, a million facts, were to be the skeleton on which he would build his great vivid flesh-and-blood story—the dream of his life, which only now did he feel the vital impulse to realise. He had his club and his cronies, harmless folk, beneath whose mild exterior he no longer divined horrible corruption. From them all he received congratulations on his altered mien. The change had done him good. He was looking ten years younger. Some chaffed him, after the way of men. Wonderful place, Paris. He found a stimulating interest in his new responsibilities. Vestiges of his perfunctory legal training remained and enabled him to unravel simple complications in the Hammersley

affairs, much to Clementina's admiration and his own satisfaction. He discovered a pleasure once more in the occasional society of Tommy, and concerned himself seriously with his love-making and his painting. He spoke of him to Dawkins, the rich donor of the Anthropological Society portrait, to whom Tommy had alluded with such disrespect to Clementina. Dawkins visited Tommy's studio and walked away with a couple of pictures, after having paid such a price as to make the young man regard him as a fairy godfather in vast white waistcoat and baggy trousers. Quixtus also entertained Tommy and Etta at lunch at the Carlton, Mrs. Fontaine completing the quartette. "I should have liked it better," said Clementina, when she heard of the incident (as she heard all that happened to the lovers), "I should have liked it better if he hadn't brought Mrs. Fontaine into it." Whereat Tommy winked at Etta, unbeknown to Clementina.

Quixtus's friendship with the spotless flower of womanhood continued. He had tea with her in her prettily-furnished little house in Pont Street, where he met several of her acquaintances, people of unquestionable position in the London world, and attended one or two receptions and even a dance at which she was present. Very skilfully she drew him into her circle and adroitly played him in public as a serious aspirant to her spotless hand. There were many who called him the variegated synonyms of a fool, for to hard-bitten worldlings few illusions are left concerning a woman like Lena Fontaine ; but they shrugged their shoulders cynically, and viewed the capture with amused interest. Only the most jaded complained. If she wanted to give them a sensation, why did she not go a step further and lead about a bishop on her string ? But these uncharitable remarks did not reach Quixtus's ears. The word went round that he was a

man of distinguished scientific position—whether he was a metallurgist or a brain specialist no one at the tired end of the London season either knew or cared to know—and, his courtly and scholarly demeanour confirming the rumour, the corner of Vanity Fair in which Lena Fontaine fought to hold her position paid him considerable deference. The flattery of the frivolous pleased him, as it has pleased many a good simple man before him. He thought Mrs. Fontaine's friends very charming, though perhaps not over-intellectual people. He went among them, however, scarce knowing why. A card of invitation would come by post from Lady Anything, whom he had once met. Before he had time to obey his first impulse and decline, Lena Fontaine's voice would be heard over the telephone.

"Are you going to Lady Anything's on Friday?"

"I don't think so."

"She has asked you, I know. I'm going."

"Oh?"

"Do come. Lady Anything tells me she has got some interesting people to meet you; and I shall be so miserable if you're not there."

Who was he to cause misery to the spotless lady? The victim yielded, and blandly unconscious of feminine guile was paraded before the interesting people as the latest and most lasting conquest of Lena Fontaine's bow and spear.

August plans were discussed. She was thinking of Dinard. What was Quixtus proposing to do? He had not considered the question. Had contemplated work in London. She held up her hands. London in August! How could he exist in the stuffy place? He needed a real holiday.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know where to go," said he.

Very delicately she suggested Dinard. He objected

in his shy way. Dinard was the haunt of fashion and frivolity.

"I should walk about the place like a daw among peacocks," said he.

"But why should you be a daw? Why not do a little peacocking? Colour in life would be good for you. And I would undertake to keep your feathers trim."

He smiled, half-allured, half-repelled by the idea of strutting among such gay birds. To refuse the spotless lady's request downright was an act of discourtesy of which he was incapable. He gave a vague and qualified assent to the proposal, which she did not then tempt him to make more definite. Content with her progress, she bided her time.

Quixtus had little leisure to reflect on the sceptical attitude towards humanity which, theoretically, he still maintained. In addition to all these hour-absorbing interests, Sheila began to occupy a considerable place in his life. Sometimes he would call at Romney Place; sometimes Clementina would bring the child to Russell Square; sometimes, when Clementina was too busy, Sheila came in the nurse's charge. He cleared out a large room at the top of the house, which was to be Sheila's nursery when she took up her quarters there. It needed re-papering, re-carpeting, re-furnishing, he decided. Nothing like cheerful surroundings for impressionable childhood. With this in view, he carried off Sheila one day to a firm of wall-paper dealers, so that she could choose a pattern for herself. Sheila sat solemnly on the sofa by his side while the polite assistant turned over great strips of paper. At last she decided. A bewildering number of parrots to the square yard, all with red bodies and blue tails, darting about among green foliage on which pink roses grew miraculously, was the chosen design. Quixtus hesi-

tated ; but Sheila was firm. They proudly took home a strip to try against the wall. Clementina, hearing from Sheila of her exploit, rushed up the next afternoon to Russell Square, and blinked her eyes before the dazzling thing.

"It's only you, Ephraim, that could have taken a child of five to select wall-papers."

"I will own that the result is disastrous," he said, ruefully. "But she set her heart upon it."

She sighed. "You're two babies together. I see I've got to fix up that nursery myself." She looked at him with a woman's delicious pity. What could a lone man know of the fitting up of nurseries ?

"You hear what your auntie says ?" he asked—the child was sitting on his knee. "We're in disgrace."

"If you're in disgrace you go in the corner," said Sheila.

"Let us go in the corner, then."

"If you hold me very tight," said Sheila.

But Clementina came up and forgave them, and kissed the little face peeping over Quixtus's shoulder.

"It does my heart good to see you with her," she cried, with rare demonstrativeness.

It was true. Sheila's sweet ways with Tommy and Etta caused her ever so little a pang of jealousy. Her increasing fondness for Quixtus made Clementina thrill with pleasure. You may say that Clementina, essentially just, was scrupulous not to encroach upon Quixtus's legal half-share in the child's esteem. But a sense of justice is not an emotion. And it was emotion, silly, feminine, romantic emotion, which she did not try to explain to herself, that filled her eyes with moisture whenever she saw the two happy together.

She laid her hand upon the fair hair.

"Do you love your Uncle Ephim ?"

"I adore him," said Sheila.

"Your uncle fully reciprocates the sentiment, my dear," said Quixtus, his hand also instinctively rising to caress the hair.

So the hands of the guardians touched. Clementina withdrew hers and turned away quickly, so that he should not see the flush that sprang into her face.

"We must be getting home now, dear," she said. "Auntie is wasting precious daylight." And with her old abruptness she left him.

He followed her down the stairs. "My dear Clementina," said he, standing bareheaded at his front door, "I wonder whether you realise how Sheila and yourself light up this dull old house for me."

She sniffed scornfully. "*I* light up?"

"*You,*" said he, with smiling emphasis.

She looked at him queerly for an instant, and then went her way.

The next time he saw her, a few days afterwards, one late afternoon, when she was tired after a heavy day's painting, she railed at him, with a return of her old biting manner. He looked surprised and pained. She relented.

"Forgive me, my good Ephraim," she said, "but I've the rough luck to be a woman. No man alive can ever conjecture what a devil of a thing that is to be."

He smiled. "You mustn't overwork," said he. "A woman hasn't the brute strength of a man."

"You're delicious!" she said.

But she was kind—exceedingly kind, to him thereafter, and fitted up the nursery in a way that made the two babies beam with delight. So Quixtus lived halcyon days.

In spite of qualms of conscience, these were halcyon days for Huckaby. He had already entered on his duties as Quixtus's assistant in the preparation of the monumental work on "The Household Arts of the

Neolithic Age." There were hundreds of marked passages in books to transcribe, with accurate notes of reference, hundreds of learned periodicals in all languages with articles bearing on the subject to be condensed and indexed, thousands of notes of Quixtus's to be collated, thousands of photographs and drawings to be classified. Never having been admitted into the inner factory of his patron's work, he was astonished at the enormous amount of material, the evidence of the unsuspected patient labour of years. He began to feel a new respect for Quixtus, whom hitherto he had regarded as a dilettante. Of course, he knew that Quixtus had a European reputation. He had not taken the reputation seriously. Like Clementina, he had been wont to scoff at prehistoric man. Now he realised for the first time that a man cannot gain a European reputation in any branch of human activity without paying the price in toil ; that there are qualities of energy, brain and will inherent in any man who takes front rank ; that there must be a calm, infinite thoroughness in his work which is beyond the power of the smaller man. No wonder his French colleagues called Quixtus *cher maître,* and deferred to his judgment. In his workroom Quixtus was a great man, and Huckaby, seeing him now in his workroom, recognised the fact.

The prospects of his appointment as secretary to the Anthropological Society were also fair. Hitherto the responsibilities of that position had been borne by one of the members in an honorary capacity, a paid and unimportant underling performing the clerical duties. But for the last year or so the operations of the society having extended, the secretaryship had become too great a tax on the time of any unpaid and no matter how enthusiastic gentleman. The Council therefore had practically determined on the appointment of a salaried secretary, and were much impressed

by the qualifications of the President's nominee. A secretary who can print below his name on official papers the fact that he is a Master of Arts and late Fellow of his College lends distinction to any learned society. A snuffy, seedy, and crotchety member had been put forward as an opposition candidate. But his chances were small. Huckaby's star was in the ascendant.

It was a happy day for him when he moved his books and few other belongings from the evil garret where he had lived to modest but cheerful lodgings near Russell Square. He looked for the last time around the room which had been the scene of so many degradations, of so many despairs, of so many torturings of soul. All that was a part of his past life ; the greasy wall-paper, the rickety deal furniture, the filth-sodden, ragged carpet, the slimy soot on the window-sill that had crept in from the circumambient chimney-stacks through the ill-fitting window-sash, the narrow, rank bed—all that had been part and parcel of his being. The familiar smell of uncared-for, unclean human lives saturated the house. He shuddered and slammed the door and tore down the stairs. Never again ! Never again, so help him God ! A short while afterwards he was busy arranging his books in the bright, clean sitting-room of his new lodgings, and a neat maid in white cap, cuffs, and apron brought in afternoon tea, which she disposed in decent fashion on a little table. When she had gone he stood and looked down upon the dainty array. He realised that henceforth this was his home. He picked up from a plate a little three-cornered watercress sandwich; but instead of eating it, he stared at it, and the tears rolled down his face.

One day, however, towards the end of July, was marked by a black cloud. His day's work being over

he was walking with light step to his lodgings, when he saw in the distance, awaiting him, almost on his doorstep, the sinister forms of Billiter and Vandermeer. His first impulse was to turn and flee ; but they had already caught sight of him and were advancing to meet him. He went on.

" Hullo, old friend," said Billiter, in a beery voice. " So we've tracked you down, eh ? We called at the old place, and found you had gone and left no address. Thought you would give us the slip, eh ? "

He still wore the costume in which he had gone racing with Quixtus ; but after constant use it had begun to look shabby. His linen was of the dingiest. His face had grown more bloated. Vandermeer, pinched, foxy, and rusty, thrust his hard felt hat to the back of his head, and, hands on hips, looked threateningly at Huckaby.

" I suppose you know you've been playing a low-down game."

" I know nothing of the sort," said Huckaby.

" Oh, don't you," said Billiter. " Look at you and look at us. Who's been getting all the fat, and who all the lean ? We have something to say to you, old friend, so let's get indoors and have it out between us."

He made a move, accompanied by Vandermeer, towards the front door. But Huckaby checked them, stricken with sudden revolt. His past life should not defile the sanctity of his new home. He would not admit them across his threshold.

" No," said he. " Whatever we've got to say to one another can be said here."

" All right," said Vandermeer, sulkily. " There's a quiet pub at the corner."

" I've chucked pubs," said Huckaby.

" Come off it," sneered Billiter. " At any rate, you can stand a round of drinks."

"I've chucked drink, too," said Huckaby. "I've sworn off. I'll never touch a drop of liquor as long as I live—and I advise you fellows to do the same."

They burst out laughing, asked him for tickets for his next temperance lecture, and then began to abuse him after the manner of their kind.

"This is a decent street," said Huckaby, "so please don't make a row."

"We're not making any row," cried Billiter. "We only want our share of the money."

"What money? Didn't I write and tell you the whole thing was off? She couldn't stick it, and neither could I. Quixtus hasn't given her one penny piece."

"We'll see what the lady has to say about that," growled Billiter.

"You're going to leave that lady alone henceforth and for ever," said Huckaby, with a new ring of authority in his voice.

The others sneered. Since when had Huckaby constituted himself squire of dames? Billiter, with profane asseveration, would do exactly what he chose. Wasn't it his scheme? He deserved his share. Vandermeer gloomily reminded him that he had cast doubts from the first on Huckaby's probity. He had put them in the cart in fine fashion. They refused to believe in Lena Fontaine's squeamishness. Huckaby grew impatient.

"Haven't you each received a letter from Quixtus's solicitors? Haven't you each signed an agreement not to worry him—on forfeiture of your allowance? Now I swear to God that if either of you molest her, you'll be molesting Quixtus. I'll jolly well see to that. She'll tell me, and I'll tell him—and bang! goes the monthly money."

Vandermeer's shrewd wits began to work.

"Molest her and we molest Quixtus? Oho! Is that the little game? She's going to marry him, eh?"

"If she does, what the blazes has that got to do with you?" Huckaby cried, fiercely. "You just let the woman alone. You've got a damned sight more out of Quixtus than you ever expected, and you ought to be satisfied."

"We ought to get more," said Billiter, "considering what we've done for him."

"You won't," said Huckaby, and seeing that they both still regarded Quixtus as a subject for further exploitation, "Let me tell you something," said he, "a few simple facts that alter the situation completely. Let us take a turn down the street."

And as they walked, he told them briefly of Hammersley's death and the Marseilles visit and the return of Quixtus, a changed man, with Clementina and the child. The bee, on which they had reckoned for honey, had left Quixtus's bonnet. There was no more Bedlamite talk about wickedness. Their occupation as evil counsellors had gone for ever. They had better accept thankfully what they had, and disappear. Any action directed against either Quixtus or Lena Fontaine would automatically bring about the demise of the goose with the golden eggs. At last he convinced them of the futility of blackmail; but they parted from him, each with a burning sense of wrong. Lena Fontaine and Huckaby had put them in the cart. They were left, they were done, they were stung—they were all things that slang has invented to describe the position of men deceived by those in whom they trusted.

"And she's going to marry him," said Vandermeer.

"Huckaby didn't say so," replied Billiter.

"He didn't contradict it. She's going to marry

him, and you bet that son of a pawn-ticket will get his commission."

"Well, we can't help ourselves," said Billiter.

"H'm!" said Vandermeer, darkly.

Huckaby, conscious of victory, went home, and taking an old student's text of "Phædo" from his shelves, abstracted his mind from the sordid happenings of the modern world.

It was a day or two after this adventure of Huckaby's that Quixtus informed Clementina of his intention of giving a dinner-party in honour of Tommy and Etta's engagement. She commended the project; a nice little intimate dinner——

"I'm afraid I'm planning rather a large affair," said he, apologetically. "A party of about twenty people."

"Lord save us!" cried Clementina, "where are you going to dig them up from?"

He stretched out his long, thin legs. They were sitting on a bench in the gardens of Russell Square, Sheila having strayed a few yards to investigate the contents of a perambulator in charge of a smiling and friendly nursemaid.

"There are people to whom I owe a return of hospitality," said he, with a smile, "and I think a certain amount of formality is due to Admiral Concannon."

"All right," said Clementina, "who are they?"

"There are the Admiral and yourself and Tommy and Etta, Lord and Lady Radfield, General and Mrs. Barnes, Sir Edward and Lady Quinn, Doorly—the novelist, you know—Mrs. Fontaine and Lady Louisa Malling——"

Clementina stiffened. The blood seemed to flow from her heart, leaving it an intolerable icicle. "Why Mrs. Fontaine?"

"Why not?"

"Why should Mrs. Fontaine be asked to Etta's party?"

"She's a charming woman," said Quixtus.

"Just a shallow society hack," said Clementina, to whom Quixtus had not confided his adventures in the gay world, not through conscious disingenuousness, but assuming that such chronicles would not interest her.

"I'm afraid you do her an injustice," he said, warmly. "Mrs. Fontaine has very brilliant social gifts. I'm sorry, my dear Clementina, that we disagree on the point; but anyhow she must be invited. As a matter of fact, it was she who suggested the party."

Clementina opened her lips to speak, and then closed them with a snap. Mother Eve sat at her elbow and murmured words of good counsel. Not by abuse is an infatuated and quixotic man weaned from seductresses. She swallowed her anger and fierce jealousy.

"In that case, my dear Ephraim," she said, with mincing civility, "there is no question about it. Of course she must be invited."

"Of course," said he.

"Who else are to come?"

He ran through the list. One or two of the prospective guests she knew personally, others by name; as to the personalities of those unknown to her she made polite inquiries. So unwontedly sugared were her phrases that Quixtus, simple man, forgot her outburst.

"You haven't given a dinner-party like this for a long time."

"Not for many years. Of course I have had men's dinners—chiefly my colleagues in the Anthropological Society. But this is a new venture."

"I wish it every success," said Clementina, mendaciously. "The only wrong note in it would be

myself. Oh yes, my dear Ephraim," she said, anticipating his protest, "I'm not made for such a galaxy of fashion. I tread upon daintily covered corns. I'm a savage—all right in my wigwam with those I care for—but no use in a drawing-room. You must leave me out of it."

Quixtus, shocked and hurt, turned and put out both hands in appeal.

"My dearest friend, how can you say such things? You positively must come."

"My dearest friend," she replied, forcing her grim lips into a smile, "I positively won't."

And that was the end of the matter. She parted from him cordially, and went home with more devils tearing her to pieces with redhot pincers than had ever been dreamed of in Quixtus's demonology.

CHAPTER XXII

ROMNEY PLACE slumbered in the afternoon sunshine. Most of the blinds of the early Victorian houses were drawn, symbols of quietude within. A Persian cat, walking across the roadway, stopped in the middle, after the manner of cats, and leisurely made her toilette. A milk-cart progressed discreetly from door to door, and the milkman handed the cans to hands upstretched from areas with unclattering and nonflirtatious punctilio. When he had finished his round and disappeared by the church, the street was empty for a moment. The cat resumed her journey and sat on a doorstep blinking in the sun. Presently a foxy-faced man, shabbily clad, entered this peaceful scene, and walked slowly down the pavement.

It was Vandermeer, still burning with a sense of wrong, yearning for vengeance, yet trembling at the prospect of wreaking it. At Tommy's door he hesitated. Of his former visit to the young man no pleasant recollections lingered. Tommy's manners were impulsive rather than urbane. Would he listen to Vandermeer's story or would he kick him out of the house ? Vandermeer, starting out on his pilgrimage to Romney Place, had fortified himself with the former conjecture. Now that he had come to the end of it the latter appeared inevitable. He always shrank from physical violence. It would hurt very much to be kicked out of the house, to say nothing of the moral damage. He hovered in agonising uncertainty, and took off his hat, for the afternoon was warm. Now,

while he was mopping the brow of dubiety, a front door lower down the street opened, and a nurse and a little girl appeared. They descended the steps and walked past him. Vandermeer looked after them for a moment, then stuck on his hat and punched the left-hand palm with the right-hand fist with the air of a man to whom has occurred an inspiration. Miss Clementina Wing also lived in Romney Place. That must be the child, Quixtus's ward, of whom Huckaby had spoken. It would be much better to take his story to Clementina Wing, now so intimately associated with Quixtus. Women, he argued, are much more easily inveigled into intrigue than men, and they don't kick you out of the house in a manner to cause bodily pain. Besides, Clementina had once befriended him. Why had he not thought of her before ? He walked boldly up the steps and rang the bell.

Clementina was fiercely painting drapery from the lay figure—a grey silk dress full of a thousand folds and shadows. The texture was not coming right. The more she painted the less like silk did it look. Now was it muddy canvas ; now fluffy wool. Every touch was wrong. Every stroke of her brush since her yesterday's talk with Quixtus was wrong. She could not paint. Yet in a frenzy of anger she determined to paint. What had the woman invited to Quixtus's dinner-party to do with her art ? She would make the thing come right. She would prove to herself that she was a woman of genius, that she had not her sex hanging round the neck of her spirit. If Quixtus chose to make a fool of himself with Mrs. Fontaine, in Heaven's name let him do so. She had her work to do. She would do it, in spite of all the society hacks in Christendom. The skirt began to look like a blanket stained with coffee. Let him have his dinner-party. What was there of importance in so contemptible a thing as

a dinner-party? But this infernal woman had suggested it. How far was he compromised with this infernal woman? She could wring her neck. The dress began to suggest a humorously streaky London fog.

"Damn the thing!" cried Clementina, wiping the whole skirt out. "I'll stand here for ever, until I get it right."

Her tea, on a little table at the other end of the studio, remained untouched. Her hair fell in loose strands over her forehead, and she pushed it back every now and then with impatient fingers. The front-door bell rang, and soon her maid appeared at the gallery door.

"A gentleman to see you, ma'am."

"I can't see anybody. You know I can't. Tell him to go away."

The maid came down the stairs.

"I told him you weren't in to anybody—but he insisted. He hadn't a card, but wrote his name on a slip of paper. Here it is, ma'am."

Clementina angrily took the slip; "Mr. Vandermeer would be glad to see Miss Wing on the most urgent business."

"Tell him I can't see him."

The maid mounted the stairs. Vandermeer? Vandermeer? Where had she heard that name before? Suddenly she remembered.

"All right. Show him down here," she shouted to the disappearing maid.

She might just as well see him. If she sent him away the buzzing worry of conjecture as to his urgent business would flitter about her mind. She threw down her palette and brush and impatiently rubbed her hands together. Into what shape of moral flaccidity was she weakening? Five months ago all the

urgent business of all the Vandermeers in the world could go hang when she was painting and could not get a thing right. Why should she be different now from the Clementina of five months ago ? Why, why, why ? With exasperated hands she further confounded the confusion of her hair.

The introduction of Vandermeer put a stop to these questionings. She received him, arms akimbo, at a short distance from the foot of the stairs.

" I must apologise, Miss Wing, for this intrusion," said he, " but perhaps you may remember——"

" Yes, yes," she interrupted. " Ham-and-beef shop, which you transmogrified into a restaurant. Also Mr. Burgrave. What do you want? I'm very busy."

The sight of the mean little figure holding his felt hat with both hands in front of him, with his pointed face, ferret eyes, and red, crinkly hair, did not in any way redeem her remembered impression.

" A very grave danger is threatening Dr. Quixtus," said he. " It is impossible for me to warn him myself, so I have come to you, as a friend of his."

" Danger ? " cried Clementina, taken off her guard. " What kind of danger ? "

" You will only understand, if I tell you rather a long story. But first I must have your promise of secrecy as far as I am concerned."

" Don't like secrecy," said Clementina.

" You can take whatever action you like," he said, hastily. " It's in order that you may act in his interest that I'm here. I only want you to give me your word that you won't compromise me personally. I assure you, you'll see why when I tell you the story."

Clementina reflected for a moment. It was a danger threatening Quixtus. It might be important. This little weasel of a man was of no account.

"All right," she said. "I give my word. Go ahead."

She took a pinch of tobacco from the yellow package and a cigarette paper, and, sitting in a chair in the cool draught of the door opening on to the garden, with shaky fingers rolled a cigarette.

"Sit down. You can smoke if you like. You can also help yourself to tea. I won't have any."

Vandermeer poured himself out some tea and cut an enormous hunk of cake.

"I warn you," said he, drawing a chair within conversational distance, "that the story will be a long one—I want to begin from the beginning."

"Go ahead, for goodness sake," said Clementina.

Vandermeer was astute enough to conjecture that a sudden denunciation of Mrs. Fontaine might defeat his object by exciting her generous indignation; whereas by gradually arousing her interest in the affairs of Quixtus, the climactic introduction of the execrated lady might pass almost unrecognised.

"The story has to do, in the first place," said he, "with three men, John Billiter, Eustace Huckaby, and myself."

"Huckaby?" cried Clementina, startled. "What has he to do with you?"

"The biggest blackguard of us all," said Vandermeer.

Clementina lay back in her chair, her attention caught at once.

"Go on," she said.

Whereupon Vandermeer began, and with remorseless veracity—for here truth was far more effective than fiction—told the story of the relations of the three with Quixtus, in the days of their comparative prosperity, when he himself was on the staff of a newspaper, Billiter in possession of the fag-end of his for-

tune, and Huckaby a tutor at Cambridge. He told how, one by one, they sank ; how Quixtus held out the helping hand. He told of the weekly dinners, the overcoat pockets.

"Not a soul on earth but you three knew anything about it ?" asked Clementina, in a quavering voice.

"As far as I know, not a soul."

He told of the drunken dinner ; of Quixtus's anger ; of the cessation of the intercourse ; of the extraordinary evening when Quixtus had invited them to be his minister of evil ; of his madness ; of his fixed idea to work wickedness ; of his own suggestion as regards Tommy.

"You infamous devil !" said Clementina, between her set teeth. In her wildest conjectures, she had never imagined so grotesque and so pitiable a history. She sat absorbed, pale-cheeked, holding the extinct stump of cigarette between her fingers.

Vandermeer paid no attention to the ejaculation. He proceeded with his story; told of Billiter and the turf ; of Huckaby and the heart-breaking venture.

"Oh, my God !" cried Clementina. "Oh, my God !" He told of the meetings in the tavern. Of the hunger and misery of the three. Of the plot to use a decoy woman in Paris, who was to bleed him to the extent of three thousand pounds.

"What's her name ?" she cried, her lips parted in awful surmise.

"Lena Fontaine," said Vandermeer.

Clementina grew very white, and fell back into her chair. She felt faint. She had worked violently, she had felt violently since early morning. Vandermeer started up.

"Can I get you anything ? Some water—some tea ?"

"Nothing," she said, shortly. The idea of receiving

anything from his abhorrent hands acted as a shock. "I'm all right. Go on. Tell me all you know about her."

He related the unsavoury details that he had gleaned from Billiter, scrupulously explaining that these were at second hand. Finally he informed her with fair accuracy of Huckaby's latest report, giving however his own interpretation of Huckaby's conduct, and laid the position of Billiter and himself before her.

"You see," said he, "how important it was for me to obtain your pledge of secrecy."

"And what do you get out of coming to me with this story?"

Vandermeer rose, and held his hat tight.

"Nothing except the satisfaction of having queered the damned pitch of both of them."

Clementina shrank together in her chair, her hands tight over her face, all her flesh a shuddering horror. Then she waved both hands at him blindly.

"Go away! Go away!" she said, in a hoarse whisper.

Vandermeer's shifty eyes glanced from Clementina to a stool beside his chair. On it lay the great hunk of cake which he had cut but had not been able to eat during his narration. She was not looking. He pocketed the cake and turned. But Clementina had seen. She uttered a cry of anguish and horror.

"Oh, God! Are you as hungry as that? You'll find some money in that end drawer—" she pointed to an oak dresser against the gallery wall. "Take what you want to buy food with, and go. Only go!"

Vandermeer opened the drawer, took out a five-pound note, and, having mounted the stairs, left the studio.

Clementina staggered into the little garden, her

brain reeling. She, who thought she had fathomed the depths of life, and, scornful of her knowledge thereof, rode serene on the surface, knew nothing. Nothing of the wolf instinct of man when hunger drives. Nothing of the degradation of a man when the drink fiend clutches at his throat. Lord ! How sweet the air, even in this ridiculous little London garden, after the awful atmosphere of that beast of prey !

Quixtus ! All her heart went out to him in fierce love and pity. Generous, high-souled gentleman, at the mercy of these ravening wolves ! She walked round and round the little garden path. Things obscure to her gradually became clear. But many remained dark—maddeningly impenetrable. Something had happened to throw the beloved man off his balance. The Marrable trial might well be a factor. But was that enough ? Yet what did the past matter ? The present held peril. The web was being woven tight around him. She had hated the woman intuitively at first sight. Had dreaded complications. It was a million times worse than she had in her most jealous dreams conceived. If he were lured into marriage, what but disaster could be the end ? And Sheila ! Her blood froze at the thought of her darling coming into contact with the woman. All her sex clamoured.

Before she acted, every dark corner must be illuminated. There must be no groping ; no false movement. One man would certainly be able to throw light—Huckaby, the trusted friend of Quixtus. The more she thought of him the more she was amazed. Here was one of the ghastly band, an illimitable scoundrel, the one who had openly suggested to Quixtus the most despicable, yet the most fantastic, wickedness of all, now the confidential secretary, the col-

laborator, the *fidus Achates,* of the sane and disillusioned gentleman.

With sudden decision she marched into the studio and took up the telephone and gave a number. Quixtus's voice eventually answered. Who was there ?

" It's me. Clementina. Is Mr. Huckaby still with you ?"

Huckaby had left half an hour ago.

" Can you give me his address ? I want to ask him to come and see me. To come to tea. I like him so much, you know."

The address came through the telephone. She noted it in her memory. Quixtus inquired for Sheila. Clementina gave him cheery news and rang off. All this was arrant disingenuousness and duplicity. But Clementina did not care. What woman ever does ?

She ran up to her bedroom, thrust on a coat, pinned on the hat with the wobbly rose, and went out. In the King's Road she found a taxicab. A quarter of an hour brought her to Huckaby's lodgings.

He had spent a happy and untroubled day, and was finishing the " Phædo " with great enjoyment, when Clementina burst into the room. He leaped from his chair in amazement.

" My dear Miss Wing ! "

" You infernal villain ! " said Clementina.

Huckaby staggered back. To such a salutation it is difficult to respond in the ordinary terms of hospitality.

" Will you take a seat," said he, " and explain ? "

He drew a chair to the open window. She plumped herself down.

" I think it's for you to explain," she said.

" I presume," said Huckaby, after a pause, " that something in connection with my past life has come to your ears. I will grant that there was in it much

that was not particularly creditable. But my conscience now is free from reproach."

Clementina sniffed. "You must have a very accommodating conscience. What about Dr. Quixtus and Mrs. Fontaine?"

"Well, what about it?"

"You know the kind of woman Mrs. Fontaine is—you introduced her to him—and yet you are allowing her to inveigle him into marriage. Oh, don't deny it. I know the whole infamous conspiracy from A to Z."

Huckaby stifled an oath. "Those brutes Vandermeer and Billiter have been giving the woman away to you!" He clenched his fists. "The blackguards!"

"I don't know anything about Van-what's-his-name or the other man. I only know one thing. This marriage is not going to take place. I might have gone straight to Dr. Quixtus; but I thought it best to see you first. There are various things I want cleared up."

Huckaby looked at the woman's strong, rugged face, and then his eyes wandered round the little cool haven that was his home, and a great fear fell upon him. If Quixtus learned the truth now about Mrs. Fontaine, he would never be forgiven. He would be put on the same footing as the two others; and then the abyss. Of course he could lie, and Mrs. Fontaine could lie. But what would be the use? The revelation of the true facts to Quixtus would fit in only too well with his past disingenuousness and with his urgent insistence on the heart-breaking adventure. And his iron-faced visitor would soon see to it that the lies were swept away. His face grew ashen.

"You have me in your power," he said, humbly. "Once I was a gentleman and a scholar. Then there were years of degradation. Now, thanks to Quixtus, I'm on the way to becoming my former self. If you

denounce me to Quixtus, I go back. For sheer pity's sake don't do it."

"Let me hear what you've got to say for yourself," said Clementina, grimly.

"What are Quixtus's feelings with regard to Mrs. Fontaine I don't know. He has never spoken to me on the subject. But he certainly admires her for what she really is—a charming, well-bred woman."

"Umph!" said Clementina.

"Suppose," continued Huckaby, "suppose we were drawn into this conspiracy. Suppose when we came to put it into practice both our souls revolted. Suppose she began to like Quixtus for his own sake. Suppose her soul also revolted from her past life——"

"Fiddlesticks!" said Clementina.

"I assure you it's true," he said, earnestly. "Let us suppose it is, anyhow. Suppose she saw in a marriage with a good man her salvation. Suppose she was ready to make him a good wife. Suppose I thoroughly believed her. How could I, clinging to the same plank as she, do otherwise than I have done—kept silent?"

"Your duty to your benefactor should certainly outweigh your supposed duty to this worthless creature."

Huckaby sighed. "That's the woman's point of view."

Clementina made an angry gesture. "I suppose you're right. Always the confounded woman's point of view—when one wants to look at things judicially. Yes. You couldn't give the woman away—a man's perverted notion—I see. Well—let us take it, for the sake of argument, that I believe you. What then?"

"I don't know," said he. "Mrs. Fontaine and myself are at your mercy."

"Umph!" said Clementina again. She paused, glanced shrewdly at his face, as he sat forward in the

chair on the opposite side of the window, twisting nervous fingers and staring out across the street.

"Tell me your story—frankly—of Dr. Quixtus," she said at last, "from the time of the Marrable trial. As many details as you can remember. I want to know."

Huckaby obeyed. He was, as he said, at her mercy. His story confirmed Vandermeer's, but it covered a wider ground, and, told with truer perception, cast the desired light on dark places. She learned for the first time—for hitherto she had concerned herself little with Quixtus's affairs—the fact of his disinheritance, Quixtus having, one raging day, revealed to Huckaby the history of the cynical will. She questioned him about Will Hammersley. His account of Quixtus's half-given and hastily snatched confidence was a lightning flash.

Clementina rose, aghast, and walked about the room. The idea of such a horror had never entered her head. Hammersley and Angela—it was incredible, impossible. There must have been some awful hallucination. That Hammersley, Bayard without fear and without reproach, and Angela, quiet, colourless saint, could have done this thing baffled all imaginings of human passion. It was inconceivable, ludicrous, grotesque. But to Quixtus it was real. He believed it. It lay at the root of his disorder. Even now, with his disorder cured, he believed it still. She was rent with his anguish.

"My God! How he must have suffered!"

"And in spite of everything," said Huckaby, "he is as tender to Hammersley's little daughter as if she were his own."

She swooped upon him in her abrupt fashion.

"Thank you for that. You've got a heart somewhere about you."

She sat down again. "When do you think this suspicion, or whatever it was, crossed his mind? Let us go back."

They talked long and earnestly. At length, Huckaby having ransacked his memory of things past, they fixed as a probable date the day of the hostless dinner. Quixtus had sent down word that he was ill. The excuse was entirely false. Nothing but severe mental trouble could have stood in the way of his taking the head of the table. Obviously something had happened. Huckaby had a vague memory of seeing Quixtus, as he entered the museum, crush a letter in his hand and stuff it in his jacket pocket. It might possibly have been a letter incriminating the pair.

Whether the conjecture was right or wrong did not greatly matter. Clementina felt now that she held the key to Quixtus's mad conduct. Blow after blow had fallen on him. Those whom he had trusted had betrayed him. He had lost faith in humanity. The gentle nature could not withstand this loss of faith. There had been shock. He had set out to work devildom. The pity of it!

She uttered a queer, choking laugh. "And not one piece of wickedness could he commit!"

The summer twilight began to creep over the quiet street, and the darkness deepened at the back of the room. A long silence fell upon them. Clementina sat as motionless as a dusky sphinx, absorbed by strange thoughts and wrung by strange emotions that made her bosom heave and her breath come quickly. A scheme, audacious, fantastic, romantic, began to shape itself in her mind, sending the blood tingling down to her feet, to her finger-tips.

At last she made an abrupt movement.

"It's getting dark. What can the time be? I must go home."

She rose.

"Before I go," she said, "we must settle up about Mrs. Fontaine."

"I suppose we must," groaned Huckaby. "All I ask you is to spare her as much as you can."

"We must think first of Quixtus," she replied shortly. "What we've got to do for him is to build up his faith in humanity again—not to give the little he has another knockdown blow. See?"

Huckaby raised his head with swift hope.

"Do you mean that he must not know about her?"

"Or about you. That's what I mean."

"God bless you!" gasped Huckaby.

"All the same, this precious marriage project has got to be put a stop to—forever and ever, amen. I hope you realise that thoroughly."

Huckaby could not meet her keen eyes. He hung his head.

"I suppose you mean me to break it gently to her that—that the game is up."

"I don't mean anything of the kind," she snapped. "Now look here. Pay strict attention. If you obey me implicitly and scrupulously, I'll still see whether I can't be your friend—and I can be a good friend; but if you don't, God help you! I've given a pledge of secrecy to my informant this afternoon. Of course I've broken it, like a woman. So you've got to keep it for me. See? You're not to let those two blackguards suffer in any way on my account. Promise."

"I promise," said Huckaby.

"Then you're not to breathe a single syllable to Mrs. Fontaine. Best keep out of her way. Leave me to deal with her. I'll let her down gently. I'll give you my word on it. Is that a bargain?"

"Yes," said Huckaby.

She put out her hand frankly.

"Good-bye."

He accompanied her to the front door.

"Can I get you a taxi?"

"Lord, no. When I'm a lady you can. I'll walk till I find one."

Clementina sped to Romney Place with shining eyes, and a smile lurking at the corners of her lips. The first thing she did on arrival was to rush down to the telephone.

"Is that you, Ephraim?"

"Yes," came the answer.

"I've changed my mind, and I'm coming to your dinner-party."

"Delighted, my dear Clementina."

"Good-bye."

She rang off, and rushed upstairs to make a fool of herself over Sheila, who, already put to bed, lay awake in anticipation of Clementina's good-night cuddle.

"When you go to stay with your uncle, I wonder whether he'll spoil you like this."

"You'll come, too," said Sheila, sedately, "and then you can go on spoiling me."

"Lord preserve us!" cried Clementina. "What a scandal in Russell Square!"

Towards ten o'clock Tommy made his appearance. The daily calls to inquire after her health and happiness had grown to be a sacred observance. But as the studio was rigorously closed to him during the daylight hours his visits were vespertilian. If she wanted him, she told him to stay. If she didn't, she sent him about his business. He had got into the habit of kissing her, nephew fashion, when they met and parted. She liked the habit now, for she felt that the boy loved her very dearly. And in an aunt-like, and very satisfying and comfortful way, she, too, loved him with all her heart.

"Can I stay?"

She nodded. He removed the set palette from the chair on to which she had cast it when Vandermeer was announced, and sat down.

"What have you been doing with yourself?"

He entered upon a long story. Some picture or the other was shaping splendidly. His uncle had taken Etta and himself to lunch at the Savoy.

"Said he was thinking of going to Dinard for August. Rum place for him to go, isn't it?"

Clementina repressed manifestation of interest in the announcement. But it set her pulses throbbing.

"I suppose he can go where he likes, can't he?" she snapped. "What kind of a lunch did you have?"

Tommy ran through the menu. It was his own selection. He had given the dear old chap some hints in gastronomy. It was wonderful how little he knew of such essential things. Seemed to have set his heart on giving them pheasant. In July. After that they had gone to see the New Futurists. His uncle seemed to know all about them. Wonderful work; but they were all erring after false gods. He thanked heaven he had her, Clementina, to keep him orthodox. It was all absinthe and morphia. He rattled on. Clementina, leaning far back in her chair, watched the curls of cigarette smoke with shining eyes and a Leonardesque smile lurking at the corners of her lips.

"Why, Clementina!" he cried, with sudden indignation. "You're paying not the slightest attention to me."

"Never mind, Tommy," she said. "You go on talking. It helps me to think. I'm going to have a devil of a time—the time of my life!"

"What in the world are you going to do?"

"Never mind, Tommy. Never mind. Oh, what a fool I was not to think of it before!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE next morning Clementina put off a sitter, a thing which she had never done before, and, letting work go hang, made an unprecedented irruption into Russell Square.

"It's about this dinner of yours," she said as soon as Quixtus appeared. "I telephoned you yesterday that I was coming."

"And I said, my dear Clementina, that I was more than delighted."

"It was the morose wart-hog inside of me that made me decline," she said frankly. "But there's a woman of sense also inside me that can cut the throat of the wart-hog when it likes. So here I am, a woman of sense. Now will you let a woman of sense run this dinner-party for you? Oh—I know what you may be thinking," she went on hastily without giving him time to reply. "I'm not going to suggest liver and bacon and a boiled potato. I know how things should be done, better than you."

"I'm afraid I'm inexperienced in entertainments of this kind," said Quixtus, with a smile. "Spriggs generally attends to such matters."

"Spriggs and I will put our heads together," said Clementina. "I want you to give rather a wonderful dinner-party. What kind of table decorations have you?"

Spriggs was summoned. He loaded the dining-room table with family plate and table-centres and solid cut glass. His pride lay in a mid-Victorian

épergne that at every banquet in the house proudly took the place of honour with a fat load of grapes and oranges and apples. Clementina set apart a few articles of silver and condemned the rest, including the épergne, as horrors.

"You'll let me have the pleasure, Ephraim," she said, "of providing all the flowers and making out a scheme of decoration. Anything I want I'll get myself and make you a present of it. I'm by way of being an artist, you know, so it will be all right."

"Could any one doubt it?" said Quixtus. "I am very much indebted to you, Clementina."

"A woman comes in useful now and then. I've never done a hand's turn for you, and it's time I began. You'll want a hostess, won't you?"

"Dear me," said Quixtus, somewhat taken aback. "I suppose I shall. I never thought of it."

"I'll be hostess," said Clementina. "I'm a kind of aunt to Tommy and Etta, for whom you're giving the party. I'm a kind of connection of yours—and you and I are kind of father and mother to Sheila. So it will be quite correct. Let me have your list of guests and don't you worry your head about anything."

Clementina in her sweeping mood was irresistible. Quixtus, mild man, could do no more than acquiesce gratefully. It was most gracious of Clementina to undertake these perplexing arrangements. New sides of her character exhibited themselves every day. There was only one flaw in the newly revealed Clementina—her unaccountable disparagement of Mrs. Fontaine. But even this defect she remedied of her own accord.

"I take back what I said about Mrs. Fontaine," she said abruptly. "I was in a wart-hoggy humour. She's a charming woman, with brilliant social gifts."

Quixtus beamed, whereat Clementina felt more

wart-hoggy than ever; but she beamed also, with a mansuetude that would have deceived Mrs. Fontaine herself.

Clementina, after an intimate interview with a first resentful, then obfuscated and finally boneless and submissive Spriggs, went her way, a sparkle of triumph in her eyes. And then began laborious days, during which she sacrificed many glorious hours of daylight to the arrangements for the dinner-party. She spent an incredible time in antique shops and schools of art needlework, and even haunted places near the London docks hunting for the glass and embroideries and other things she needed. She ordered rare flowers from florists. She wasted her evenings over a water-colour design for the table decoration, and over designs for the menu and name-cards.

"It's going to be a dinner that people shall remember," she said to Etta.

"It's going to be splendid," said Etta. "You think of everything, darling, except the one thing—the most important."

"What's that, child?"

"Have you got a dress to wear, darling?"

"Dress?" echoed Clementina, staring at the child. "Why, of course. I've got my black."

Etta stood aghast. "That old thing you took with you packed anyhow on the motor trip?"

"Naturally. Isn't it good enough for you?"

"It's not for me," said Etta, growing bold. "I love you in anything. It's for the other people. Do go and get yourself a nice frock. There's still time. I've never liked to tell you before, dear, but the old one *gapes* at the back——" she paused dramatically, "gapes dreadfully."

"Oh, Lord, let it gape," cried Clementina impatiently. "Don't worry me."

But Etta continued to worry, with partial success. Clementina obstinately refused to buy new raiment, but consented to call in Miss Pugsley, the little dressmaker round the corner in the King's Road, who fashioned such homely garments as Clementina deigned to wear, and to hand over the old black dress to her for alterations and repairs. Etta sighed and spent anxious hours with Miss Pugsley and forced a grumbling and sarcastic Clementina to stand half clad while the frumpy rag attained something resembling a fit.

"At any rate there are no seams burst and it *does* hook together," said Etta, dismally surveying the horror at the final fitting.

"Humph!" said Clementina, contemplating herself wryly in the mirror. "I suppose I look like a lady. Now I hope you're satisfied."

Meanwhile such painting as she did in the intervals of her daily excursions abroad progressed exceedingly. Tommy coming into the studio one evening caught sight of the picture of the lady in the grey dress standing on its easel.

"Stunning!" he cried. "Stunning! You can almost hear the stuff rustle. How the dickens do you get your texture? You're a holy mystery. By Jove, you are! All this"—he ran his thumb parallel with a fold in the drapery—"all this is a miracle." He turned and faced her with worshipping eyes in which the tears were ready to spring. "By God, you're great!"

The artist was thrilled by the homage; the woman laughed inwardly. She had dashed at the task triumphantly and as if by magic the thing had come out right. She was living, these days, intensely. There was no miracle that she could not work.

A morning or two afterwards she issued a ukase to Tommy and Etta that they were to accompany her on an automobile excursion. Tommy, to whom she had

constituted herself taskmistress, boyishly glad of the holiday, flew down Romney Place, and found a great luxurious hired motor standing at her door. Presently Etta arrived, and then Clementina and Sheila and the young lovers started. Where were they going? Clementina explained. As she could not keep Sheila in London during August, she had decided on taking a furnished cottage in the country. Estate agents had highly recommended one at Moleham-on-Thames. She was going down to have a look at it, and wanted their advice. The motor ploughed through the squalor of Brentford and then sped along the Bath Road, through Colnbrook and Slough and Maidenhead and through the glorious greenery in which Henley is embowered, and on and on by winding shady roads, with here and there a flashing glimpse of river, by fields lush in golden pasture, up and down the gentle hills, through riverside villages where sleeping gaiety brings a smile to the eyes, between the high hedges of Oxfordshire lanes, through the cool verdant mystery of beech woods, until it entered through a great gateway and proceeded up a long avenue of elms and stopped before a slumbering red-brick manor-house.

"This the cottage?" asked Tommy.

"Do you think it's a waterfall?" asked Clementina.

They alighted. A caretaker took the order-to-view given by the estate agents and conducted the party over the place. The more Tommy saw the more amazed did he grow. There was a park; a garden; a pergola of roses; a couple of tennis courts; a lawn reaching to the river. The house, richly furnished throughout, contained rooms innumerable; four or five sitting-rooms, large dining-room, billiard room, countless bedrooms, a magnificent studio; in the grounds another studio.

"I'll take it," said Clementina.

"But, my dear," gasped Tommy, "have you considered? I don't want to be impertinent—but the rent of this place must be a thousand pounds a minute."

She drew him apart from Etta and Sheila.

"My dear boy," she said. "For no reason that I can see, I've lived all my life on tuppence a year. It's only quite lately that I've realised that I'm a very rich woman and can do anything more or less I please. I'm going to take this place for August and September and hire a motor-car, and you and Etta are going to stay with me, and you can each bring as many idiot boys and girls as you choose, and I shall paint and you can paint and Sheila can run about the garden, and we're all going to enjoy ourselves."

Tommy thrust his hands into the pockets of his grey flannels and declared she was a wonder. Whereupon they proceeded to Moleham and after lunch at "The Black Boy," motored back to Chelsea.

These were days filled with a myriad activities. The dinner-party engaged her curious attention. She sent back proofs of the menu and name cards time after time to the firm of art printers before she was satisfied. Then she took them to Quixtus. He was delighted.

"But, my dear Clementina, why are you taking all this ridiculous trouble?"

She laughed in her gruff way, and summoned Spriggs to another dark and awful interview.

A day or two before the dinner, Mrs. Fontaine who, although she had suggested the idea, did not view a dinner-party as a world-shaking phenomenon, bethought her of the matter. A pretty little note had summoned Quixtus to tea. They were alone.

"I have been wondering, my dear Dr. Quixtus," she said, sweetly, her soft eyes on his, as soon as she had heard of the acceptances of the people in whom she was

interested—" I have been wondering whether we are good enough friends for me to be audacious."

He smiled an assurance.

" If I brought you a few flowers for the table would you accept them? And if you did, would you let me come and arrange them for you? It would be such a pleasure. Even the best trained servants can't give the little touch that a woman can."

Quixtus blushed. It was difficult to be ungracious to the flower of womanhood; yet the flower of womanhood had come too late in the day with her gracious proposal. He explained, wishing to soften the necessary refusal, that he had already called in the help of his artistic friends, Miss Clementina Wing and Tommy Burgrave.

" Why didn't you send for me? Didn't you think of me? "

" I did not venture," said he.

" I have been deluding myself with the fancy that we were friends." She sighed and looked at him with feminine significance. " Nothing venture, nothing win."

But Quixtus, simple soul, was too genuinely distressed by obvious happenings to follow the insidious scent. With great wisdom Clementina had shown him her water-colour design, and he knew that Mrs. Fontaine, with all her daintiness, could not compete with the faultless taste and poetic imagination of a great artist. He wondered why so finely sensitive a nature as the flower of womanhood did not divine this. Her insistence jarred on him ever so little. And yet he shrank from wounding susceptibilities.

" I never thought you would be interested in such trivial domestic matters," said he.

" It is the little things that count."

For the first time in his intercourse with her he felt

uncomfortable. Here was the lady maintaining her reproach of neglect. If she took so much interest in this wretched dinner-party, why had she not offered her services at once? Unwittingly he contrasted her inaction with Clementina's irresistible energy. In answer to her remark he said, smiling:

"I'm not so sure about that, although it's often asserted. We lawyers have an axiom: *De minimis non curat lex.*"

"Pity a poor woman. What on earth does that mean?"

He translated.

"The law is one thing and human sentiment another."

With all her rough contradiction and violent assertion, Clementina never pinned him down to a fine point of sentimental argument. There was a spaciousness about Clementina wherein he could breathe freely. This close atmosphere began to grow distasteful. There was a slight pause, which Mrs. Fontaine filled in by handing him his second cup of tea.

"Miss Clementina Wing," said he, dashing for the open, "is so intimately associated not only with the object of our little entertainment, but also with myself in other matters, that I could do no less than consult her."

Lena Fontaine bent forward, sugar-tongs in hand, ready to drop a lump into his cup—a charmingly intimate pose.

"Of course, I understand, dear Dr. Quixtus. And is she really coming to the dinner?"

"Why not?"

"She's so—so unconventional. I thought she never went into society."

"She is honouring me by making an exception in my case," replied Quixtus, a little stiffly.

"I'm delighted to hear it," she said sweetly; but in her heart she bitterly resented Clementina's interference. She would get even with the fish-fag for this.

On the morning of the dinner-party Clementina sent for Tommy. He found her, as usual at work. She laid down her brush and handed him the water-colour design.

"I'm too busy to-day to fool about with this silly nonsense. I can't spare any more time for it. You can carry out the scheme quite as well as I can. You'll find everything there. Do you mind?"

Tommy did not mind. In fact, he was delighted at the task. The artist in him loved to deal with things of beauty and exquisite colours.

"Shall I give an eye to the wines?"

"Everything's quite settled. I saw to it yesterday. Now clear out. I'm busy. And look here," she cried, as he was mounting the staircase, "I'm not going to have you or Etta fooling round the place to-day. I'm going to paint till the very last minute."

She resumed her painting. A short while afterwards, a note and parcel came from Etta. From the parcel she drew a long pair of black gloves. She threw them to the maid, Eliza.

"What shall I do with them, ma'am?"

"Wear 'em at your funeral," said Clementina.

A few minutes before eight Quixtus stood in the great drawing-room waiting to receive his guests. On the stroke came Admiral Concannon, scrupulously punctual, and Etta followed by Tommy, who, having given the last touches to the table, waylaid her on the stairs. Then came Lady Louisa Malling and Lena Fontaine demure in pale heliotrope. After them Lord and Lady Radfield, he, tall and distinguished, with white moustache and imperial, she, much younger than

he, dumpy, expensively dressed, wearing a false air of vivacity. Then came in quick succession General and Lady Barnes, Griffiths (Quixtus's colleague in the Anthropological Society), and his wife, John Powersfoot (the Royal Academician), Mr. and Mrs. Wilmour-Jackson, physically polished, vacant, opulent, friends of Mrs. Fontaine. Gradually the party assembled and the hum of talk filled the room. During an interval Quixtus turned to Tommy. What had become of Clementina, who had promised to play hostess? Tommy could give no information. All he knew about her was that he had stopped at her door and offered a lift in his cab, and Eliza had come down with a verbal message to the effect that he was to go away and that Miss Wing was not coming in his cab. Tommy opined that Clementina was in one of her crotchety humours. Possibly she would not turn up at all. Etta took Tommy aside.

"I'm sure that old black frock has split down the back and Eliza is mending it with black thread."

Only the Quinns and Clementina to arrive; and at ten minutes past the Quinns, Sir Edward, Member of Parliament, and Lady, genial, flustered folk with many apologies for lateness. The hands of the clock on the mantelpiece marked the quarter. Still no Clementina. Quixtus grew uneasy. What could have happened? Lena Fontaine turned from him and whispered to Lord Radfield.

"She has forgotten to put on her boots and is driving back for them."

Then Spriggs appeared at the door and announced:

"Miss Clementina Wing."

And Clementina sailed into the room.

For the first and only time in his life did Quixtus lose his courtliness of manner. For a perceptible instant he stood stock still and stared open-mouthed. It

was a Clementina that he had never seen before; a Clementina that no one had ever seen before. It was Clementina in a hundred-guinea gown, gold silk gleaming through ambergris net, Clementina exquisitely corseted and revealing a beautifully curved and rounded figure; Clementina with a smooth, clear olive skin, with her fine black hair coiled by a miracle of the hairdresser's art, majestically on her head, and set off with a great diamond comb; Clementina wearing diamonds at her throat; Clementina perfectly gloved; Clementina carrying an ostrich feather fan; Clementina erect, proud, smiling, her strong face illuminated by her fine eyes a-glitter with suppressed excitement; Clementina a very great lady and almost a beautiful woman. Those who knew her stared like Quixtus; those who did not looked at her appreciatively.

She sailed across the room, hand outstretched to Quixtus.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, and so sorry I could not run in to-day. I've been up to my ears in work. I hope Tommy has been a satisfactory lieutenant."

"He has most faithfully carried out your instructions," said Quixtus, recovering his balance.

Clementina smiled on Mrs. Fontaine. "How d'ye do. How charming to meet you again. But you're looking pale to-night, my dear, quite fagged out, I hope nothing's the matter."

She turned round quickly, leaving Lena Fontaine speechless with amazement and indignation, and shook hands with the astonished Admiral. Was this regal-looking woman the same paint-daubed rabbit-skinner of the studio? He murmured vague nothings.

"Well, my dears?"

Tommy and Etta thus greeted stood paralysed before her like village children at a school feast when they are addressed by the awe-inspiring squire's lady.

"Pinch me. Pinch me hard," Tommy whispered when Clementina had turned to meet Lord Radfield, whom Quixtus was presenting.

"I believe I have the pleasure of taking you down to dinner," said Lord Radfield.

"I'm a sort of brevet hostess in this house," said Clementina. "A bad one, I'm afraid, seeing how late I am."

Spriggs announced dinner. Quixtus led the way with Lady Radfield, Clementina on Lord Radfield's arm closed the procession. The company took their places in the great dining-room. Quixtus at the end of the table by the door sat between Lady Radfield and Lady Louisa. Clementina at the foot between Lord Radfield and General Barnes. Lena Fontaine had her place as near Clementina as possible, between Lord Radfield and Griffiths, a dry splenetic man who had taken her in. Clementina had thus arranged the table-plan.

The scheme of decoration was too striking in its beauty not to arouse immediate and universal comment. It was half barbaric. Rich Chinese gold embroideries on the damask; black and gold lacquer urns, a great black-and-gold lacquer tray. Black irises, with golden tongues, in gold-dust Venetian glass; tawny orchids flaring profusely among the black and gold. Here and there shining through greenery the glow of golden fruit, and, insistent down the long table, the cool sheen of ambergris grapes. Glass and silver and damask; black and gold and ambergris; audacious, startling, then appealing to the eye as perfect in its harmony.

Quixtus and Tommy each proclaimed the author. All eyes were directed to Clementina. Attention was diverted to the name and menu-cards. Lord Radfield put his name-card into his pocket.

"It is not every day in the week that one takes away a precious work of art from a London dinner-party."

Clementina enjoyed a little triumph, the flush of which mounted to her dark face. With the flush, and in the setting she had prepared for herself, she looked radiant. Her late entrance had produced a dramatic effect; the immediate concentration of every one on her work, added to the commonplace of her reputation, had at once established her as the central figure in the room; and she sat as hostess at the foot of the table a symphony in ambergris, gold and black. Woman, in the use of woman's weapons, has evolved no laws of fence.

"One might almost have said she did it on purpose," murmured the ingenuous Tommy.

"Did what?" asked Etta.

"Why, used the table as a personal decoration. Don't you see how it all leads up to her—leads up, by Jove, to her eyes and the diamonds in her hair. And, I say, doesn't it wipe out Mrs. Fontaine?"

Tommy was right. Lena Fontaine's pale colouring, her white face and chestnut hair faded into nothingness against the riot of colour. The pale heliotrope of her dress was killed. She was insignificant to the eye. Conscious of this eclipse, hating herself for having put on heliotrope and yet wondering which of her usual half-tone costumes she could have worn, she paid her tribute to the designer with acid politeness. She wished she had not come. Clementina as fish-fag and Clementina as Princess were two totally different people. She could deal with the one. How could she deal with the other? The irony in Clementina's glance made her quiver with fury; her heart still burned hot with the indignation of the first greeting. She felt herself to be in the midst of hostile influences. Griffiths, a man of unimaginative fact, plunged headlong

into a discourse on comparative statistics of accidents to railway servants. She listened absently, angry with Quixtus for pairing her with so dreary a fellow. Griffiths irritated by her non-intelligence transferred the lecture to his other neighbour as soon as an opportunity occurred. Lena Fontaine awaited her chance with Lord Radfield. But Clementina held him amused and interested, and soon drew General Barnes into the talk. With the slough of her old outer trappings Clementina had cast off the slough of her abrupt and unconventional speech. She was a woman of acute intellect, wide reading and wide observation. She had ideas and wit and she had come out this evening flamingly determined to use all her powers. Her success sent her pulses throbbing. Here were two men, at the outset of her experiment, hanging on her words, paying indubitable homage, not to the woman of brains, not to the well-known painter, but to the essential woman herself. The talk quickly became subtle, personal, a quick interchange of hinted sentiment, that makes for charm. When Lord Radfield at last turned to Lena Fontaine, she could offer him nothing but commonplaces; Goodwood, a scandal or so, the fortunes of a bridge club. Clementina adroitly brought them both quickly into her circle, and Lena Fontaine had the chagrin to see the politely bored old face suddenly lit up with reawakened interest. For a moment or two Lena Fontaine flashed into the talk, determined to offer battle; but after a while she felt dominated, cowed, with no fight left in her. The other woman ruled triumphant.

Tommy could not keep his eyes off Clementina, and neglected Etta and his left-hand neighbour shamefully. An unprecedented rosiness of finger-nails caught his keen vision. In awe-stricken tones he whispered to Etta:

"Manicured!"

"Go on with your dinner," said Etta, "and don't stare, Tommy. It's rude."

"She should have given us warning," groaned Tommy. "We're too young to stand it."

The exquisitely cooked and served meal proceeded. The French chef whom Clementina had engaged and to whom she had given full scope for his art had felt like an architect unrestricted by site or expense who can put into concrete form the dreams of a lifetime. John Powersfoot, the sculptor, sitting next to Lady Louisa, cried out to his host:

"This is not a dinner you're giving us, Quixtus, it's a poem."

Lady Louisa ate on, too much absorbed in flavours for articulate thought.

Quixtus smiled. "I'm not responsible. The mistress of the feast is facing me at the other end."

Powersfoot, who knew the Clementina of everyday life, threw up his hands in a Latin gesture which he had learned at the Beaux-Arts and of which he was proud.

"The most remarkable woman of the century."

"I think you're right," said Quixtus.

He looked down the table and caught her eye and exchanged smiles. Now that he could adjust his mind to the concept of Clementina transfigured, he felt conscious of a breathless admiration. He grew absurdly impatient of the social conventions which pinned him in his seat leagues of lacquer and orchids away from her. Idiotic envy of the two men whom she was fascinating by her talk entered his heart. She was laughing, showing her white strong teeth, as only once before she had shown her teeth to him. He longed to escape from the vivaciously inane Lady Radfield and

join the group at the other end of the table. Now and then his eye rested on Lena Fontaine; but she had almost faded out of sight.

At the end of the dinner he held the door open for the ladies to pass out. Clementina, immediately preceded by Etta, whispered a needless recommendation not to linger. The door closed. Etta put her arm round Clementina's waist.

"Oh, darling, you look too magnificent for words. But why didn't you tell me? Why did you make a fool of me about the old black dress?"

Clementina disengaged the girl's arm gently.

"My child," she said, "if I have the extra pressure of a feather on me, I'll yell. I'm suffering the tortures of the damned."

"Oh, poor darling."

"It's worth it, though," said Clementina.

When the men came upstairs she again enjoyed a triumph. Men and women crowded round her and ministered instinctively to her talk. All the pent-up emotions, longings, laughter of years found torrential utterance. Powersfoot, standing over her, was amazed to discover how shapely were her bare arms and how full and graceful her neck and shoulders.

Quixtus talked for a few moments with the spotless flower of womanhood. In the stiff formality of the drawing-room she regained her individuality. With a resumption of her air of possession she patted a vacant seat on the couch beside her and invited him to sit down. He obeyed.

"I thought you were going to neglect me altogether," she said.

He protested courteously. They sparred a little. Then Wilmour-Jackson, polished and opulent, eyeglass in eye, crossed over to the couch and Quixtus, rising with an eagerness that made Lena Fontaine bite

her lip, yielded him the seat and joined the charmed circle around Clementina. A little thrill of pleasure passed through him as she glanced a welcome. He gazed at her, fascinated. Something magnetic, feminine, he was too confused to know what, emanated from her and held him bound. Never in all the years of his knowledge of her had she appealed to him in this extraordinary manner. Why had the perfect neck and arms, the graceful figure been hidden under shapeless garments? Why had the magnificence of her hair never been revealed? Why had grim frown and tightened lips locked within the features the laughter that now played about them? Once he had seen her face illuminated—at the hotel in Marseilles—but then it was with generous and noble feeling and he had forgotten the disfiguring attire. But now she had the stateliness of a queen, and men hung around her, irresistibly attracted. . . .

At last Lady Radfield disentangled her lord and departed. Others followed her example. The party broke up, with the curious suddenness of London. In a brief interval between adieux, Quixtus and Clementina found themselves alone together.

"Well?" she asked. "Are you pleased?"

"Pleased? What a word! I'm dumbfounded. I've been blind and my eyes are open. I never knew you before."

"Because I have a decent gown on? I couldn't do less."

"Because," said he, "I never knew what a beautiful woman you were."

The blood flew to her dark cheeks. She touched his arm, and looked at him.

"Do you really think I look nice?"

His reply was cut short by the Quinns coming up

to take leave, but she read it on his face. The room thinned. Lena Fontaine came up.

"It's getting late. I must rescue Louisa and go. Your dinner-party was quite a success, Dr. Quixtus."

"So glad you think so," said Clementina. "Especially now that I hear you were originally responsible for it. It was most kind of you to think of our dear young people. But don't go yet. Lady Louisa is quite happy with Mr. Griffiths. He is feeding her with facts. Let us sit down for a minute or two and chat comfortably."

She moved to a sofa near by and motioned Mrs. Fontaine to a seat. The latter had to yield. Quixtus drew up a chair.

"I've done a desperate thing," said Clementina. "I've taken the old Manor House at Moleham-on-Thames, for August and September. It's as big as a hotel, and unless I fill it with people, I shall be lost in it. Now every one who wants to paint can have a studio—I myself am going to paint every morning—and any one who wants to write can have a library. Sheila has picked out *the* library for you, Ephraim—takes it for granted that you're coming. I hope you will. You'll break her heart if you don't—and there'll be a room for Mr. Huckaby, too. There'll be Etta and Tommy, of course—and the Admiral has promised to put in a week or two—and so on. And if you'll only come and stay August with me, my dear Mrs. Fontaine, my cup of happiness, unlike my house, will be full."

Lena Fontaine gasped for an outraged moment. Then a swift, fierce temptation assailed her to take the enemy at her word and fight the battle; but, glancing at her, she saw the irony and banter and deadly purpose behind the glittering eyes, and her courage

failed her. She was dominated again by the intense personality, frightened by her sudden and unexpected power. To stay under the woman's roof was an impossibility.

"I'm sorry I can't accept such a charming invitation," she said with a smile of the lips, "for I've made an engagement with some friends to go to Dinard."

"Oh—you're going to Dinard, too?" cried Clementina.

"What do you mean by 'too'?" asked the other shortly.

"I heard a rumour that Dr. Quixtus was going there. It seemed so silly that I paid no attention to it. Are you really going Ephraim?"

It was a trap deliberately laid. It was a defiance, a challenge. From the corner of the sofa she stretched out her bare arm at full length and laid her hand on his shoulder. The other woman looked white and pinched; her eyes lost their allurement, and regarded him almost with enmity.

"You promised."

The words were snapped out before she could realise their significance. The instant after she could have thrust hat-pins into herself in punishment for her folly. The manhood in Quixtus leapt at the lash. He knew then, with a startling clarity of assurance, that nothing in the world would induce him to strut about casinos with her in Dinard. He smiled courteously.

"Pardon me, dear Mrs. Fontaine. I made no promise. You must remember my little—my little trope of the daw and the peacocks."

Clementina, satisfied, withdrew her hand.

"Of course, dear Ephraim, if you would prefer to go to Dinard with Mrs. Fontaine——"

Lena Fontaine rose. "Dr. Quixtus is obviously free

to do what he chooses. I wish you would kindly leave me out of it."

Clementina rose, too, and held out her hand.

"I will, my dear Mrs. Fontaine," she said sweetly. "If I can. Good-bye. It has been so delightful to have had you."

Her exit with Lady Louisa was confused with that of other stragglers. The Admiral, Etta and Tommy remained. They all went down to Quixtus's study, the little back room of the adventure of the drunken housekeeper now cheery with decanters and syphons and cigarettes, and chatted intimately till the Admiral reminded Etta that the horses—such fat horses, murmured Etta—had been standing for nearly an hour. Tommy accompanied father and daughter to the carriage. Quixtus and Clementina were left alone.

"Can I tell Sheila to-morrow that you're coming down to Moleham?"

"I think you can," said Quixtus. "I think you can quite safely."

"I'm sorry Mrs. Fontaine wasn't able to join us."

"Now why?" he asked, vaguely conscious of outstretched claw and flying fur.

"Because she has such brilliant social gifts," replied Clementina.

There was a span of silence. Clementina inhaled a puff of the Turkish cigarette she had lit and then threw it into the grate.

"For God's sake, my dear man, look in that drawer and give me some tobacco I can smoke. I smuggled it in yesterday."

Quixtus gave her the yellow package and papers and she rolled a cigarette of Maryland and smoked contentedly. Tommy came in.

"Will you and these infants lunch with me to-morrow at the Carlton?"

"With pleasure," said Quixtus.

"Do you know," she said, "I've never been inside the place? It will be quite an adventure."

A few moments later Tommy and herself were speeding westward in a taxicab. The boy spoke little. All his darling conceptions of Clementina had been upheaved, dynamited, tossed into the air and lay around him in amorphous fragments. Nor was she conversationally inclined. Tommy now was a tiny little speck in her horizon. Yet when the motor drew up at her house in Romney Place and he opened the gate for her, something significant happened.

He put out his hand. "Good-night, Clementina."

She laughed. "Where are your manners, Tommy? Aren't you going to kiss me?"

He hesitated, just the fraction of a second, and then kissed her. She ran up to her room exultant; not because she had been kissed; far from it. But because he had hesitated. Between Clementina fish-fag and Clementina princess was a mighty gulf. She knew it. She exulted. She went to bed, but could not sleep. She had a headache; such a headache; a glorious headache; a thunder and lightning of a headache!

CHAPTER XXIV

TOMMY, calling for Clementina the next morning, was confronted at the open door, not by Eliza, but by a demure damsel in a black frock, black apron, and a black bow in her hair, who said "Oui, monsieur," when addressed. Tommy, still bewildered, asked whether she was a new lady's maid. "Oui, monsieur," said the damsel, and showed him into the Sheraton drawing-room. He sat down meekly and waited for Clementina. She came down soon, a resplendent vision, exquisitely gowned, perfectly hatted, delicately gloved, and in her hand she jingled a small goldsmith's shop. She pirouetted round.

"Like it?"

Tommy groaned. "Clementina, darling, tell me, in Heaven's name, what you're playing at, or I'll go raving mad."

"I told you that one of these days I was going to become a lady. The day has come. Don't I look like a lady?"

"That's the devil of it," he laughed. "You look like an archduchess."

They picked up Etta and met Quixtus at the Carlton where they lunched in the middle of the great gay room. The young people's curious awe of the transmogrified Clementina soon melted away. The big, warm-hearted Clementina they loved was unchanged; but to her was added a laughter-evoking, brilliant, joyous personage whose existence they had never suspected. Quixtus went home stimulated and uplifted.

He had never enjoyed two hours so much in his life.

And that was the beginning of the glory of Clementina Wing.

Day by day the glory deepened. The pyrotechnic—a flash, a bedazzlement and then darkness—was not in Clementina's nature. She had deliberately immolated the phœnix of dusty plumage and from its ashes had arisen this second and radiant phœnix incarnation. She suffered, as she confessed to herself, infernally; for a new fire-born phœnix must have its skin peculiarly tender; but she grinned and bore it for the greater glory—well, not of Clementina alone—but of God and her sex and the happiness of those she loved and the things that stood for the right.

She was fighting the interloping woman with her own weapons. She, Clementina, the despised and rejected of men, was pitting her sex's fascinations against the professional seductress. She had won the first pitched battle. She had swept the enemy from the field. Sheer fierceness of love, almost animal, for the child, sheer pity flaming white for the man grown dear to her, sheer sex, sheer womanhood—these were the forces at work. It would have been easy to denounce the woman to Quixtus. But that might have thrown him back into darkness. Easy, too, to have held her knowledge as a threat over the woman's head and bade her begone. But where had been the triumph? Where the glory? Whereas to scorn the use of her knowledge and conquer otherwise, therein lay matter for thrilling exultation. It was an achievement worth the struggle.

And the glory of the riot through her veins of the tumultuous Thing she had kept strangled to torpor within her! The Thing that had been stirred by the springtide in a girl's heart, that had leapt at the parrot tulips in the early May, that had almost escaped from

grip on the moonlit night at Vienne, that had remained awake and struggling ever since—the glory to let it go free and carry her withersoever it would! Art—to the devil with it! What was Art in comparison with this new-found glory?

It made her ten years younger. It took years from the man for whose fascination she brought it into play. Hers was a double conquest, the rout of the woman, the capture of the man. Daily she battled. Sheila, the lovers, a new portrait of him which she suddenly conceived the splendid notion of painting, all were pretexts for keeping the unconscious man within the sphere of her influence. Any impression that the other had made on his heart or his mind should be deleted, and her impression stamped there in its place, so that when he met the other out of her presence, as meet her he undoubtedly must, he would wear it as a talisman against her arts and blandishments. Twice also during the dying days of the season, late that year, she went out into the great world and gave her adversary battle in the open.

It was between these two engagements that she had a talk with Huckaby.

Huckaby, doing his best to act loyally towards both parties, led a precarious moral existence. The sight of Clementina queening it in dazzling raiment about Quixtus's house and the despairing confidences of Lena Fontaine had enabled him to form a fairly accurate judgment of the state of affairs. His heart began to bleed for Lena Fontaine. She would come to his lodgings and claim sympathy. To not a soul in the world but him could she talk freely. She was desperate. That abominable woman insulted her, trampled on her, poisoned Quixtus's mind against her. He had changed suddenly, seemed to avoid her, and, when he found himself in her company, he was just polite and courte-

ous in his gentle way, and smilingly eluded her. The Dinard intimacy, on which she had reckoned, had faded into the land of dreams. He was being dragged off before her eyes to some fool place up the river to be watched and guarded like a lunatic. What was she to do? Ruin would soon be staring her in the face. She had thought of upbraiding him for neglect, of reproaching him for having played fast and loose with her affections, of putting him through the ordeal of an emotional scene. Of that, however, she was afraid; it might scare him away for good and all. She wept, an unhappy and ill-treated woman, and Huckaby supplied sympathy and handkerchiefs and a mirror so that she could repair the ravages of tears.

One day Huckaby and Clementina met in the hall of the Russell Square house.

"Well," she said. "Have you seen Mrs. Fontaine lately?"

He admitted that he had.

"Taking it rather badly, I suppose," she remarked with a reversion to her grim manner.

"She is miserable. As I told you, it means all the world to her—her very salvation."

Clementina caught the note of deep pleading in his voice and fixed him with her shrewd eyes.

"You seem to concern yourself very deeply about the lady."

Huckaby glanced at her for a moment hesitatingly; then shrugged his shoulders. Clementina was a woman to whom straight dealing counted for righteousness. He gave her his secret.

"I've grown to care for her—to care for her very much. I know I'm a fool, but I can't help it."

"Do you know anything of the lady's private affairs—financial, I mean—how much she has honestly of her own?"

"Four hundred pounds a year."

"And you?"

"When I take up the appointment of the Anthropological Society I shall have five hundred."

"Nine hundred pounds. Have you any idea of the minimum rate per annum at which she would accept salvation?"

"No," said Huckaby in a dazed way.

"Well, work it out," said Clementina. "Goodbye."

Her second sortie into the great world was on the occasion of a garden party at the Quinns. Lady Quinn had asked her verbally at Quixtus's dinner and had sent her a formal card. Knowing that Quixtus was going and more than suspecting that the enemy would be there, too, she had kept her own invitation a secret. Welcomed, flattered, surrounded by the gay crowd in the large, pleasant Hampstead garden, it was some time before she saw Mrs. Fontaine. At last she caught sight of her sitting with Quixtus, at the end of the garden, half screened by a tree-trunk from the mass of guests. As soon as Clementina could work her way through, she advanced quickly and smiling towards them. Quixtus sprang to his feet and seemed to take a deep breath as a man does when he flings bedroom windows wide open on his first morning in mountain air.

"Clementina! I hadn't the dimmest notion that you were coming! How delightful!" He surveyed her for a moment as she stood before him, parasol on shoulder. Clementina with a parasol! "Pray forgive my impertinence," said he, "but you're wearing the most beautiful dress I ever saw."

It was hand-painted muslin—a fabulous thing. She laughed, turned to Lena Fontaine, demure in a simple fawn costume.

"He's improving. Have you ever known him to compliment a woman on her dress before?"

"Many times," said Mrs. Fontaine, mendaciously.

"It must be your excellent training," said Clementina. She turned to Quixtus. "I've seen Huckaby this morning, and everything's quite arranged for the transportation of your necessary books and specimens down to Moleham. He'll do it beautifully, even though it takes a pantechnicon van, and you won't be worried about it at all. He's a splendid fellow."

"He is rendering me invaluable assistance."

"Dr. Quixtus tells me he is quite an old friend of yours, Mrs. Fontaine," said Clementina. "What a pity you can't be persuaded to come down to Moleham."

"Are you going to have a chaperon to your rather mixed house-party?"

"I should if you would honour me by coming, my dear Mrs. Fontaine—a dowager dragon of propriety. But an Admiral of the British navy is quite safeguard enough for me."

The hostess, coming through the edge of the crowd, carried off Quixtus. The two women were left alone. Lena Fontaine turned suddenly, white-lipped, shaking with anger.

"I've had enough of it. I'm not going to stand it. I'm not going to be persecuted like this any longer."

"What will you do?"

Lena Fontaine clenched her small hands. What could she do.

"Come, come," said Clementina. "Let us have a straight talk like sensible women, and put the pussy-cat aside, if we can. Sit down. Do. There's only one point of dissension between us. You know very well what it is—there's no use fencing. Give it up. Give up all idea of it and I'll let you alone. Give it all up.

You can see for yourself that I won't let you do it."

"It's outrageous for you to speak to me like this," said the other, half hysterically.

"I know it is," said Clementina coolly. "I'm an outrageous woman. Been so all my life. To do an outrageous thing is only part of the day's work. So I just say outrageously: give it up."

Lena Fontaine fluttered a glance at the strong face and caught the magnetism of the black glittering eyes, and remained silent. She knew that she was no match for this vital creature. She was confronting overwhelming odds. The rough fish-fag of Paris who could walk straight into the mould of a great lady and carry everything contemptuously before her suddenly impressed her with a paralysing sense of something uncanny, relentless, irresistible. She was less a woman than an implacable force. For the first time in her life of Hagardom, Lena Fontaine felt beaten. The nun's face grew drawn and haggard. Fright replaced the allurement of her eyes. She said nothing, but twisted one gloved hand nervously in the other. She was at the mercy of the victor. There was silence for some moments. Then Clementina's heart smote her. All this elaborate wheel to break a butterfly—a very naughty, sordid, frayed and empty little butterfly—but still a butterfly!

"My dear," she said at last, very gently, "I know how hard life is on a lone and defenceless woman. I know you have many reasons to hate me for preventing you from making that life softer and sweeter. But perhaps, one of these days, you mayn't hate me so much. I'm every infernal thing you like to call me, and when I'm interfered with I'm a devil. But at heart I'm a woman and a good sort. I won't outrage you by saying such an idiot thing as 'Let us be friends,' when you've every rational desire to murder

me; but I ask you to remember—and I've suffered enough not to be a silly fool going round saying serious things I don't mean—I ask you to remember that if ever you want a woman to turn to, you can count on me. I'm a good bit older than you," she added generously, "I'm thirty-six."

"Oh, God!" cried the other, bursting into tears, "I'm thirty-seven."

"Impossible," said Clementina, in genuine amazement. "You look nothing like it." She rose and touched the weeping woman's shoulder. "Anyhow," she said, "I've a certain amount of female horse-sense that might come in useful if you want it."

Whereupon Clementina made her way straight through the throng to her hostess, and after a swift farewell left the garden-party.

The enemy was finally routed; the confession of age, a confession of defeat. The victory had been achieved much more easily than she had anticipated. When she went home she looked with a queer smile into one of the hanging wardrobes with which she had been obliged to furnish her bedroom so as to accommodate the prodigious quantity of new dresses. Why all the lavish expenditure, the feverish preparation, the many hours wasted at great dressmakers, modistes, and other vendors of frippery—why the hairdressers, the face specialists—why the exquisite torture of tight lacing—why the responsibility of valuable jewels, her mother's, up till then safely stored at the bank—why the renting of the caravanserai at Moleham—why the revolution of her habits, her modes of expression, her very life—why, in short, such fantastic means to gain so simple an end? Was it worth it? Clementina slammed the wardrobe door and glanced at herself in the long mirror that was exposed. She saw a happy woman, and she laughed. It was worth it. She had

gained infinitely more than a victory over a poor sister of no account. Sheila came running into the room.

"Oh, what a beautiful auntie!"

She caught the child to her and hugged her close.

The legal formalities with regard to Will Hammersley's affairs were eventually concluded; but in spite of all enquiries the identity of Sheila's mother remained a curious mystery. No record of Hammersley's marriage could be found, either at Somerset House or at Shanghai. No reference to his wife appeared in the papers he had left behind him. At last, a day or two before her departure for Moleham, Clementina made a discovery.

A trunk of Hammersley's merely containing suits of clothes and other wearing apparel had remained undisposed of, and Clementina was going through them with the object of packing them off to some charitable association, when from the folds of a jacket there dropped a bundle of letters tied round with a bit of tape. She glanced idly at the outer sheet. The handwriting was a woman's. The few words that met her eyes showed that they were love-letters. Clementina sat on an empty packing case—all Hammersley's personal belongings had been dumped in her box-room—and balanced the bundle in her hand. They were sacred things belonging to the hearts of the dead. Ought she to read them? Yet she became conscious of a feminine intuition that they might hold a secret that would bring comfort to the living. So she undid the tape and spread out the old crumpled pages, and as she read, a tragedy, a romance as old as the world was revealed to her. The letters dated from seven years back. They were from one Nora Duglade, a woman wretchedly married, breaking her heart for Will Hammersley. Clementina read on. Suddenly she gave a sharp cry of astonishment and leaped to her feet.

There was a reference to Angela Quixtus, who was in her confidence. Clementina rapidly scanned page after page and found more and more of Angela. The writer, like most women, could not bear to destroy the beloved letters; she dared not keep them at home; Angela had lent her a drawer in her bureau. . . .

Clementina telephoned to Quixtus to come immediately on urgent business. In twenty minutes he arrived, somewhat scared. Was anything wrong with Sheila?

"I've found out who her mother was," said Clementina.

"Who was she?" he asked quickly.

She bade him sit down. They were in the drawing room.

"Some one called Nora Duglade. . . . I don't remember her."

Quixtus passed his hand over his forehead as he threw back his thoughts.

"Mrs. Duglade. . . ." he said in bewilderment, "Mrs. Duglade. . . ."

"A friend of Angela's," said Clementina.

"Yes. A school friend. They saw very little of each other. I met her only once or twice. I had no notion Hammersley knew her. . . . Her husband was a brute, I remember—used to beat her. . . . I think I heard she had left him———"

"For Will Hammersley."

"He died years ago . . . of drink. . . . Oh-h!" He shuddered and hid his face in his hands.

"Read these few pages," said Clementina, and she left the room very quietly.

About ten minutes afterwards she came in again. He sprang up from his chair and grasped both her hands. His eyes were wet and his lips worked tremulously.

"I found a letter from Hammersley in Angela's drawer—it had got stuck at the back. . . . It was for the other woman, my dear——" his voice quavered into the treble. "It was for the other woman."

She led him to the stiff sofa and sat beside him and held his hand. And she had the joy of seeing a black cloud melt away from a man's soul.

From that hour when he had revealed to her the things deep and sacred, dark and despairing of his heart, and had gone forth from her sympathy aglow with a new-found faith in humanity, the bond between them was strengthened a thousandfold. Quixtus found that he could obtain not only swift response to his thoughts from a keen intelligence, but wide, undreamed of understanding of all those subtle workings of the spirit, regrets, hopes, judgments, prejudices, shrinkings, wonderings, impulses, which are too elusive to be thoughts, too vague to be emotions. And yet, she herself was never subtle. She was direct and uncompromising. As a shivering man enters a cosy room and warms himself before a blazing fire, so did he unquestioningly warm his heart in Clementina's personality. And as the shivering man knows, without speculating, that the fire is intense and strong, so did he know that Clementina was intense and strong.

All through the idyll of the remaining summer, he felt this more and more. She stood for something that he had missed in life, something that Angela, pale, passionless, negative reflection of himself, had never given him. She stood for richness, bigness, meaning. A simple man, not given to introspection or analysis of motive, new sensations, new realisations came to him as they come to a child and caused development. And among other impressions that deepened on his mind—and his was the mind of a scholar and dreamer, sweet and clean—was that of Clementina (now appearing to

the world as God Almighty intended her to appear) as a physically fine and splendid creature.

And, during all the summer idyll in the Manor House at Moleham-on-Thames, Clementina, in her uncompromising way, maintained the new phœnix's plumage preened and shiny. The old habit of clawing at her hair while she was painting she circumvented by tying her head in an Angelica Kauffmann handkerchief. Tommy made her a present of one, in cardinal red, in which she flamed gipsy-like about the studio. Involuntarily, inevitably, the manner of all the men in her house-party, Quixtus, Huckaby, Admiral Concannon, Poynter (who spent a week-end), Tommy and Tommy's cronies who came and went as they pleased, was tinged with a deference and a homage which made life a thing of meaning and delight.

Sometimes a little scene like this would take place:

To Clementina painting hard in the morning, enter the housekeeper.

"Please, ma'am, we'll soon be out of wine."

She would frown at the canvas. "Well, what of it?"

"The gentlemen, ma'am."

"Oh, let them drink ginger-beer."

"Very well, ma'am."

Then with a laugh she would fling down her brushes, and go and attend to her cellar. To make the men in her house comfortable, the commonplace care of a hostess, gave her unimagined pleasure. Etta and her young friends could look after themselves, being females and therefore resourceful. But the men were helpless children, even the Admiral; sometimes, she thought—especially the Admiral. Their nourishment became a matter of peculiar solicitude. She invented wants for them which she forthwith supplied. Sometimes she summoned Tommy to consultation. But

when he gravely prescribed a large bath powder-puff for his uncle she upbraided him for making a jest of solemn things and dismissed him from her counsels. Her painting suffered from these inroads on her time and thoughts; but Clementina cared not. The happiness of the trustful men around her was of more consequence than the successful application of paint to canvas. Sometimes, sitting at the head of her table she would feel herself a mother to them all, and her lips would twist themselves into a new smile.

Her happiest hours were those which she spent alone with Sheila and Quixtus. Since the cloud had been lifted from his soul he loved the child with a new tenderness, thus inarticulately expressing his gratitude to God for having put it into his heart to love her while the cloud hung heavy. And Clementina knew this, and invested his relations with the child in a curious sanctity. She loved to share with him the child's affection in actual physical presence. The late afternoon was Sheila's hour. Clementina would sit with them beneath the great cedar tree on the lawn and listen to the stories he had learned to pour into Sheila's insatiable ears. They were mostly odds and ends of folk-lore. But now and then she suspected heterogeneous strains; and one day she called out:

"Are you inventing all that, Ephraim?"

He confessed with the air of a detected schoolboy.

"To hear you playing the deuce with folk-lore which you regard as a strict and sacred science amazes me. From you it sounds almost immoral."

Quixtus fingered the soft curls. "What," said he, "is all the science in the world compared with this little head?"

Clementina was silent for a moment. Then she said abruptly. "You feel like that, too, do you?"

Quixtus nodded and dreamed over the curls.

"But what happened to the princes and the Ju-Ju man?" demanded Sheila, and Quixtus had to pursue his immoral course.

August melted into September, and September drew to its close. Admiral Concannon and Etta and all the boys and girls, save Tommy, had gone, and Huckaby was busy with the repacking of books and specimens. The weather had broken. The trees dripped with rain and the leaves began to fall. Mists rose from the meadows by the river and a blue haze, sweet and sad, enveloped the low-lying hills. In the garden the sunflowers, a week before so glorious, hung their heads with a dying grace. The birds, even the thrushes, were mute. The hour under the cedar tree had become the hour of deepening twilight by the fireside. The idyll was over. London called. . . .

They had been sitting before the drawing-room fire for a long time without speaking. Sheila, with a toy shop and an army of dolls for customers, played on the floor between them, absorbed in her game. No one of the three noticed that darkness had crept into the room, for the fire leaped and flamed, throwing on them fierce lights and shadows.

"The day after to-morrow," said Clementina, breaking the silence, and looking intently at the blaze.

"Yes," said Quixtus. "The day after to-morrow."

"I think you'll find I've made all arrangements for Sheila. Atkins understands." Atkins was the nurse. "I've seen about the nursery fender which I had overlooked. . . . You mustn't let Atkins bully you, or she'll get out of hand. . . . How these three months have flown!"

"If you didn't insist," said Quixtus, "I wouldn't take her from you. But you'll miss her terribly."

"So will you when my turn comes again," replied Clementina gruffly. "What's the good of talking rubbish?"

There was another silence. He glanced at her, and a sudden flame from the fire lit up her face and he saw that her brows were bent and her mouth set grimly tight and that something glistened for a second on each cheek and then fell quickly. And each time he glanced at her he saw the same glistening drop fall.

"Uncle Ephim," said Sheila, coming and insinuating herself between his legs, "Mrs. Brown wants to buy some matches and I haven't got any."

He gave her his silver match-box and Sheila went away happy to her game.

Clementina choked a sob.

"My dear," said he at last.

"Yes?" said Clementina.

"Why shouldn't we have her always with us?"

"You mean——?" said Clementina, after a pause, and still looking into the fire.

"Even with her, I can't face that great lonely house. I can't face my empty, lonely existence. My dear," said he, bending forward in his chair, "it has come to this—that I can't think a thought or feel an emotion without you becoming inextricably interwoven with it. You have grown into the texture of my life. I know I may be impertinent and presumptuous in putting such a proposal before you——"

"You haven't put one yet," said Clementina.

"It is that you would do me the honour of marrying me," replied Quixtus.

Again there was silence. For the first time in her life she was afraid to speak, lest she should betray the commotion in her being. She loved him. She did not hide the fact from herself. It was not the mad, gorgeous passion of romance; she knew it for something

deeper, stronger, based on essentials. He lay deeply rooted in her heart, half child for her mothering, all man for her loving. When had she begun to care for him? She scarcely knew. Perhaps at Marseilles, when he had returned to her for companionship and they had walked out arm in arm. She knew that he spoke truly of his need of her. But the words that mattered, the foolish little words, he had not uttered.

"Do you care for me enough to marry me?" she asked at last.

He glanced at Sheila weighing out matches in her toy scales. It is difficult to carry on a love-scene with conviction in the presence of a third party, even of that of a beloved child of five.

"Very, very, deeply," he said in a low voice.

The dressing-bell rang and Clementina rose. "Put up your shop, darling. It's time to go to bed." Then she crossed to Quixtus's chair and stood behind him and laid one arm on his shoulder. He kissed her hand.

"Well?" said he, looking up.

"I'll tell you presently," she said, and in withdrawing her hand she lightly brushed his cheek.

Quixtus dressed quickly and came down early to the drawing-room, and soon Clementina appeared. She was wearing a red dress which she had bought during her wholesale purchasing of raiment, but had never yet worn, thinking it too flaring, and she had a red dahlia in her hair. Quixtus took both her hands and raised them to his shoulders, and she stood away from him at the distance of her bare, shapely arms, and she smiled into his eyes.

"Your answer?" said he.

"Tell me," she said, "what do you really want me for?"

"For yourself," he cried, and he caught her in his arms with swift passion and kissed her.

"If you hadn't said that," she remarked a few moments afterwards, "I don't know what my answer would have been. At any rate," she added, touching her hair with uplifted hands, "it would not have been quite so spontaneous.'

He leaned his elbow on the mantelpiece and a great light came into his pale blue eyes as he looked at her.

"Do you think, my dear," said he, "that I'm such a dry stick of a man as not to want you for your great self—your great, splendid, and wonderful self? I want you with everything in me."

She turned half aside and said gently:

"That's all a woman wants, Ephraim."

"What?"

"To be wanted," said Clementina.

It was not till the next day that she told Tommy the great news. She took him for a walk and broke it to him bluntly. But he was prepared for it. Etta had foreseen and had prophesied to his sceptical ears. He murmured well-bred congratulations.

"But your painting," said he, after a while.

"It can go hang," said Clementina. She laughed at his look of horror. "Art for the polygamous man and the celibate woman. A man can throw his soul into his pictures and also attend to his wife and family. That's out of a woman's power. She must choose between her art on the one side, and husband and children on the other—I'm telling you this, *mon petit,* for your education. I've chosen husband and children as any woman with blood in her veins would choose. It's the women without blood that choose art—don't make any mistake about it. Now and then one of 'em chooses the other—and, as she doesn't get any children and doesn't know what the deuce to do with a husband, falls back on her art again and gives the poor devil soup with camel-hair brushes floating about it and a

painting-rag for a napkin, and then there are ructions, and she goes among her weary pals and says that their sex is misunderstood and down-trodden, and they must clamour for their rights. Bosh!"

She sniffed in her old way. Tommy insisted.

"But you're a born painter, Clementina. A great painter. It means such a tremendous sacrifice."

"You young men of the present day make me tired!" she exclaimed. "You all seem to think that larks ought to fall ready roasted into your mouth. There's not a blessed thing in this world worth having without sacrifice. The big people, the people that have the big things in life are those that have paid or are prepared to pay the big price for them."

"I don't see why you should round on me like that," said Tommy. "After all, a little while ago I made no bones about sacrificing the loaves and fishes for the sake of my art—I don't want to brag—but *fiat justicia* at any rate."

"I know what you did," said Clementina, mollified, "and if you hadn't done it, I shouldn't be talking like this to you. And you're a painter and my very dear Tommy, and you can understand—Of course, I'll go on painting—I've got it in my blood. I could no more do without a paint brush handy than a tooth brush. But it's going to be secondary. I'll be the gifted amateur. Clementina Wing, painter of portraits to the nobility, gentry, mayoralty, and pork-butchery of Great Britain and Ireland is dead. You can paraphrase the epitaph. 'Here lies Clementina Wing, the married woman.' And, Tommy, my dear," she added in a softer voice, "You can add to it: '*Sic itur ad astra.*'"

"I do hope you'll be jolly happy," said Tommy.

On their way back it happened that the postman met them with the household budget. She took the letters into the hall and sorted them. Tommy went off with

his precious epistle from Etta. Huckaby appeared in quest of his chief's correspondence, and, seeing her alone, congratulated her on her approaching marriage. She thanked him and held out a letter addressed to him from Dinard.

"I've been dealing in quotations lately," she said, "and I find I've got one for you, 'Go thou and do likewise.'"

Huckaby sighed and laughed.

"One of these days, perhaps," said he.

So the idyll that seemed to be coming to an end had only just begun. They returned to London, and while Clementina (in whose charge Sheila now remained) painted frenziedly to finish the work she had in hand, Quixtus, with her help, reorganised the great gaunt house in Russell Square. The worm-eaten scarecrow of a billiard table was removed from the billiard-room built by Quixtus's father over the garden at the back of the house, and the room, spacious and top-lighted, was converted into a studio for the bride to be. Tommy, enthusiastically iconoclast, being given authority, under Clementina's directions, to refurnish, condemned rep curtains, mahogany mid-Victorian furniture—a dining-room sideboard disfigured by carvings of plethoric fruit had sent shivers down his back since infancy—Turkey carpets and all the gloom of a bygone age, and converted the grim abode into a bower of delight.

And towards the end of October the oddly mated pair were married, and Clementina went to her husband's home and the patter of the feet of the beloved child of their adoption was heard about the house and great joy fell upon them.

One day, in the early spring, Quixtus burst into the studio, a letter in hand. The greatest of all honours that the civilised world has to give to the scholar had

fallen on him—honorary membership of the Institut de France. She must know of it at once.

She was sitting before the easel, a bit of charcoal in hand, absorbed in her drawing. What he saw on the drawing-paper put, for the moment, the Institute of France out of his mind. Two arms came from the vague, headless trunk of a draped woman; one arm clasped Sheila, a living portrait, and the other something all chubby, kissable curves, such as Murillo has rendered immortal. As soon as she was aware of his presence she tore the sheet from the board, and looked at him somewhat defiantly. He went up and put his arm round her, deeply moved.

"My dear," said he, "I saw. You're the only woman in the world that could have done it. Let me look. I can share it with you, dear."

She yielded. His delicate perception of the innermost sweetnesses of life was infinitely dear to her. She set the drawing upright on the ledge. He drew a chair close to her and sat down, and he forgot the crowning glory of his intellectual life.

"It's not bad of Sheila, is it?" she said.

"And the other?"

She kissed him. "The very image. It's bound to be."

Presently she laughed and said:

"I've been thinking of the good St. Paul lately. He has a lot to say about glory. Do you remember? About the glory of celestial bodies and bodies terrestrial. 'There is one glory of the sun and another glory of the moon and another glory of the stars.' But there is one glory which that eminent bachelor never dreamed of."

"And what is that, my dear?" asked Quixtus.

"The glory of being a woman," said Clementina.

THE END.

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